

Yuji Yuji
Illustrator: Nami Hidaka



The 100th Time's the Charm:
She Was Executed 99 Times,
So How Did She Unlock
"Super Love" Mode?!



The 100th Time's the Charm:
*She Was Executed 99 Times,
So How Did She Unlock
"Super Love" Mode?!*

Yuji Yuji Illustrator: Nami Hidaka





“Oh,
Princess
Alphina!
How tragic!”

(Serves you
riiiiiiiiiiii-
ght!!!!!!
Princess
Assphina!
Squee hee
hee!)

Um. I'm not sure how to
feel about all that?

“ ”
...

(My sister.
Executed?
That can't be true.
I...won't believe
that...)

“Alphina Shinn
Sylvana, you are
under arrest.
As for the crime...
I'm sure I don't
have to say it, do I?”

(There's no way that Alphina—
the woman I love—could have
plotted the Saint's assassination.
This is some kind of mistake!)

CHARACTERS

Carl, Alphina's Brother



Scarlet, Alphina's Butler



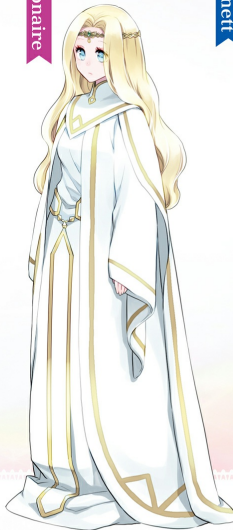
Prince Avenlock



Kithling, Lionett's Retainer



Saint Debonaire



Prince Lionett



Alphina (Arle)





CONTENTS



Chapter One.....

Interlude: Lionett ①.....

Chapter Two.....

Chapter Three.....

Chapter Four.....

Interlude: Carl.....

Chapter Five.....

Interlude: Kithling.....

Chapter Six.....

Interlude: Lionett ②.....

Chapter Seven.....

Epilogue.....



Chapter One

“Princess Alphina, you will now be sentenced to execution by beheading.”

“Yay! Thanks for the OFF-er!”

“...What?”

It was the familiar scene of Alphina’s execution. She spoke casually in front of all the elegant nobles gathered at the execution grounds.

Lionett Lione, the crown prince of the empire, glared coldly at her. In the past, he had been Alphina’s fiancé. His azure gaze, which all the young women in the country found impossibly alluring, pierced Alphina, whose limbs were shackled.

“You’re about to die. Do you understand that?”

“Oh yes, I understand that very well. More than anyone here.” *This is the ninety-ninth time I’ve been sentenced. Of course I’d be used to it by now*, she thought from the bottom of her heart.

This marked the ninety-ninth time that Alphina had been arrested on the Saint’s false charges, had her engagement called off, and been sentenced to death. Every time she died, her life would rewind, which forced her to repeat this death scene again and again.

The first thirty times or so, she’d tried her best to survive.

Once, she had tried to escape the tower she was locked in by leaping out from the highest floor, spreading a curtain like the wings of a flying squirrel. (She’d ended up falling and dying). Another time, she’d stolen a warhorse from the stable and tamed it, and then spent all night riding towards the border to escape. (Though she’d ended up dying after the horse threw her off, it was kind of fun!)

It was on the twenty-seventh time that she’d tried to cause a riot at this very execution site. That had been the only time that the lock on her manacles was broken so that she was able to easily remove them. Thus, she tried to run away

right before she was taken to the guillotine. The bald minister collapsed in shock, so she grabbed his silver staff and wielded it with the zeal of a mountain bandit. She'd kicked the coffin that was meant for her body with a, "You're in the way!"

Her behavior that time was pretty off-putting. She herself had been put off by it. Like, to the point where she thought that, even if the Saint had never appeared, she would've had her engagement called off.

No matter how much she struggled, the only thing that awaited Alphina was death.

Though she had grieved her fate up until around the fiftieth time, that was a thing of the distant past. Now, she accepted it as her destiny. After the seventieth time, she had even begun to focus on how she could make this execution scene, which was supposed to be so tragic, into something fun. Just once, she wanted to make the people gathered for the show laugh themselves into bits.

If I don't try and do that, it's just way too boring for me!

Incidentally, she'd said, "Thanks for having me-ow!" with a wink the previous loop, and her sickly mother had collapsed, so she tried to contain herself this time. She'd just attempted to make a pun about how her head would fly "off," but it seemed that the prince did not appreciate that.

I don't think he's a bad person, but I can't really tell what's going on inside that head of his...

Alphina stared at the face of the man who had been not only her school classmate but her former fiancé as well. His blond hair accentuated his porcelain skin, and his blue eyes were as cold as ice, yet gave off a somewhat insecure impression. His toned, slim figure called to mind a beautiful rapier, hence why he was known as the Golden Sword.

If only he would smile, then he could make even the goddess of beauty Dite blush.

Lionett never softened his pale face. Even Alphina, who had known him since they were in middle school, had only seen his smile once.

There were even people who secretly referred to him as “Lord Cold Heart,” but it felt like he was especially cold towards Alphina. Did the heavy pressure of being the next emperor of the Lione Empire, one of the greatest countries in the world, cause him to become frigid?

Or does he simply hate me that much...?

“Despite your position as my fiancée, you communicated with the prince of a neighboring country out of selfish jealousy. You planned to harm the Saint, who has been sent by the great God Xenos. Repent for your sins with your death.”

She knew from experience that it would be no use to say that she had no recollection of doing so.

A year ago, Saint Debonaire Lua Lightmist had appeared in this nation as a messenger of the great Xenos. She was a dainty and beautiful girl, with golden hair as pale as the mist. Her pretty face, voluptuous body, powerful light magic, and silver tongue enchanted all of the men in the country. She had become the adopted daughter of Earl Lightmist, one of the most powerful nobles, and when she put her charms on full display in front of high society, she’d stolen the heart of Prince Lionett as well.

The more that people loved the Saint, the more they despised Alphina. That was what everyone in the empire said.

“On one hand, you have the sweet and innocent Saint. On the other, you have that barbaric princess.”

“The flaxen-haired Saint, with her reserved smile, is better suited to be the next empress, at the side of the golden-haired prince.”

“Someone throw this woman out of the court! There’s not a single cute bone in her body.”

Well, it’s true that I’m not exactly cute. Alphina knew that better than anyone else. She couldn’t do anything womanly. It was, like, impossible. As a matter of fact, she didn’t know the meaning of the word.

Things had been much the same two years ago, when the prince had gone on a crusade to wipe out the northern barbarian tribes. Other noblewomen had showered him with sweet concern:

“Here’s a bouquet of gradium flowers that I had our gardener grow to pray for your success. They symbolize victory!”

“These are fortifying snacks I had our chef cook for Your Highness. Please, eat up!”

For her part, Alphina had presented to him a wooden pendant that she’d carved into the shape of a bear. She had said something like, “I hear the northern barbarians worship bears as mountain gods, so they might go easy on you!” which had invited both disapproval from the nobles and derision from the noblewomen.

I thought the bear was a pretty good idea. Besides, it was cute!

All the prince had done was glance at her and coldly answer, “I’ll take it.”

Alphina had never seen him wear the pendant—not even once. He must have thrown it away somewhere.

At the end of the day, the prince regarded her as someone he would marry for political reasons, only as a formality. And even that facade of an engagement had at last been annulled. She couldn’t be certain, since it was after her death, but the Saint would likely become the crown princess after Alphina’s execution.

At the moment, Saint Debonaire was in the back, protected by guards. She looked upon Alphina with a pitying gaze, a pure white handkerchief clutched tightly in one hand. Her expression was so heartbroken that it appeared she was on the verge of tears.

The nobles who saw her whispered amongst themselves.

“I can’t believe she’s concerned for the woman who tried to plot against her.”

“She really is a saint!”

“Oh, beautiful Lady Debonaire!”

“I want to wipe away her tears.”

Um... I’m the one who’s being plotted against here...

After the Saint arrived, Alphina had been completely set up as a villainess.

Baseless rumors spread about how she was jealous of the relationship between the prince and the Saint and had therefore bullied the Saint in a variety of ways.

Jeez, why in the world would the Saint view me as her nemesis? Did she want the position of the prince's fiancée that badly? Then she should've spoken to me about it! I would've gladly given it to her.

In truth, during the seventy-seventh repetition, Alphina had tried suggesting as much to Debonaire.

“Would you like me to give you the status of the prince's fiancée?”

The delicate Saint had fallen silent for a moment and then smiled like she wasn't sure what to say. “Oh, Princess Alphina, you're such a comedian! I'm unworthy. No one suits Lord Lionett more than you.”

My goodness, but you can say that with a straight face? At this point, Alphina felt more exasperation than anger.

Though she didn't know what Debonaire planned to do after becoming the princess, that would be after Alphina's death anyway. So Debonaire could do whatever she pleased.

“Are there any last words you want to say before you're summoned to the underworld?” Lionett asked Alphina in a frigid voice.

“No. Hurry up and ‘off’ my head, please.”

“How happy-go-lucky.”

“That's my best trait! You ought to be familiar with it. Right, Your Highness?”

“Humph.”

The nobles who'd wanted to see the princess pathetically beg for her life started to yell in anger.

“How can she be so rude to the prince?”

“Look at that impudent attitude! Those are the woman's true colors.”

“To think that if the Saint had never appeared, that woman would've been the future empress... I can't stop my shudders!”

They rained slander down on Alphina like arrows—but at this point, it felt like

nothing more than the stings of an insect. What other people thought of her, as well as their judgments, were things she no longer cared about. There was no way for her to take them to her grave, or to the next life.

But there was one single person whose opinion mattered to her.

“Carl.”

Her brother, who had the same red hair as her, was watching in the front row with their parents. Carl was ten years old this year. He stared with glassy eyes at his sister, who was about to be executed.

“I’m sorry. I can’t keep my promise to smile, cry, or be angry in your place,” Alphina called out to him.

He did not reply, nor did any emotion appear on his youthful face.

In exchange for his overly powerful magical talent, he had been born with his emotions left in the womb—that was how the nobles described the magical prodigy Carl Mann Sylvana.

Alphina’s brother didn’t have any emotions, whether positive or negative. It was rare for him to even talk. In her own way, Alphina had watched over her little brother. She really wanted to spend more time with him and take care of him, but it would’ve been upsetting if he’d thought her annoying. So she had tried to lovingly watch over him from a distance.

She had no idea what Carl thought of her. Did he find her annoying? Or did he at the very least think of her as his older sister? In the end, she’d never found out.

After she finished her farewells to her brother, a beautiful young man with blue hair and glasses stepped up. He was Kithling Ashley, an alumnus from the same high school as herself and the prince, considered to be the prince’s closest retainer.

Today, he served as the scribe who would record the events of the execution.

“Princess Alphina, things turned out exactly as I thought they would. Ever since we were in school, I was sure that your slovenliness would one day destroy you.”

Alphina did not reply.

He had said this in all ninety-nine lives.

The prince and others would do or say different things, but Kithling only uttered this exact line—without failure. In other words, he was crazy serious. He had always been the kind of honor student who found pleasure in waking up in the morning, making a schedule for the day, and then following it to the letter. He'd often clashed with Alphina, who was always late for class and would have to sneak in through the window.

"During our school years, you told me, 'Why don't you try living a freer life?' And *this* is the result of said philosophy? My oh my, but what a joke."

He regularly threw this kind of language her way. Back at school, Alphina had always retaliated, but she no longer felt the urge to do so.

"That's right, Kithling. What awaited me after living life the way I wanted to was this 'off-ing.'"

"You're saying you don't regret it?"

"Of course not! It's much better than dying in a way that isn't like me."

For a moment, Kithling did not say anything. "You really never change, even up until the end."

After he saw that Kithling had backed down, the prince gave the order in a cold voice. "Bring Alphina to the guillotine."

Roughly forced onto her feet by the muscular guards, Alphina ascended the steps. She thought she might try to shoot a wink or two at the crowd glaring at her, but a decapitated head with one eye closed sounded like it would be too creepy, so she controlled herself.

After they bound Alphina to the guillotine, the guards left.

Now, I wonder where my hundredth time is going to start? With that thought, she closed her eyes. The second before she did, she saw the hideous face of the Saint, who revealed her true colors with an ugly and gleeful twist of the lips.



...Oh, come on! Alphina let out her ninety-ninth sigh. I've repeated this so many times, now, that I'm prepared for anything. But...this bitch's final smile pisses me off no matter how many times I see it!

When Alphina came to, she was on the parlor room sofa.

"Ngh..."

Feeling like she'd awoken from a long slumber, she raised her head and looked around. Three elderly servants as well as her mother, Mary, were nearby. The furniture and red carpet were familiar. On the wall, a portrait of Yulinar, Alphina's grandmother and a great mage, was hung. It was the parlor of the mansion Alphina had grown up in.

So my hundredth start is from home? Well, that's auspicious.

The last time had started right from captivity. It had been unbearable; she'd been starving. These past few resets, she had challenged herself to see how many cheese pies she could eat from the bakery in the slums before she died. And yet she had ended that run with zero.

It would be nice if I could eat around five this time! With that thought in mind, she turned to her mother, who was sitting next to her on the couch. "Mother, what month and year is it right now?"

Her mother, who had the same red hair as her daughter, blinked. "Oh, Alph, what is it? I can understand if you're feeling out of sorts, but is it so bad that you're suffering from amnesia?"

"I'm perfectly calm. My mind is clear."

"Today is July 5, 845 Anno Xenos. It's ten at night. Please get ahold of yourself. If you're honest about what's on your mind, then the prince will understand."

"July...fifth?"

That was a familiar date for Alphina.

If she remembered correctly, that was when the empire's Intellectual Bureau

had imposed house arrest upon her. That meant *he'd* be showing up any minute now.

Bang, bang! The sound of violent knocking reverberated.

The middle-aged head maid hurriedly entered the parlor. “M-Ma’am, my lady. His Highness...Lord Lionett is...!”

The prince, accompanied by soldiers armed with swords, entered the room. His unfeeling icy blue eyes pierced through Alphina.

“Well, if it isn’t Your Highness. Hello! What business brings you here this fine evening? Do you wish to invite me for dinner? If it’s at this hour, the cheese pie stall is open.”

Despite her casual banter, Alphina thought something completely different inside. *Ah, I see. So we’re starting from here this time around.*

The night of July 5, 845—the prince himself would visit the mansion and arrest Alphina. Afterwards, she would be locked away in a castle room and then one-sidedly sentenced and executed. This chain of events had, barring a few differences, never changed throughout all ninety-nine times. No matter how much Alphina tried to stop it, all that awaited was her head popping off.

“Alphina Shinn Sylvana, you are under arrest. As for the crime... I’m sure I don’t have to say it, do I?”

His voice was as cold as frost. Alphina left her mother, who had collapsed after a dizzy spell, to the head maid and nodded. “I understand. I’ll go with you.” *If we’re starting from here, then my hundredth life won’t be very long at all...*

It seemed she would have to give up on the cheese pies once again.

However, at that exact moment, something quite unexpected happened. The prince still fixed his frigid stare on Alphina, but she heard his voice inside of her head.

(There’s no way that Alphina—the woman I love—could have plotted the Saint’s assassination. This is some kind of mistake! It has to be! Oh, Alph! My Alphina!)

Huh? What was that just now?!

Alphina was shocked at the passionate voice she'd just heard from the prince. "You seem flustered, Alphina. As if there's something you wish to hide from me," he said.

(No. She's afraid. Poor girl... Oh, why must I do this to my beloved Alphina?!)

He was arguing against the words coming from his mouth with the words in his heart. In contrast to how icy his actual speaking voice was, his inner one was heated. He sounded more dramatic too.

Alphina had no idea how to react. Next to her, her mother stood up, pale-faced.

"L-Lord Lionett, just what is the meaning of this? What could my daughter have done to warrant such a sudden arrest?!"

Instead of the prince, it was the blue-haired, bespectacled Kithling who answered her.

"Duchess Sylvana, we suspect your daughter of corresponding with a neighboring prince in an attempt to assassinate the Saint. She is jealous of the Saint's relationship with His Highness, and feared that the Saint would jeopardize her status as his fiancée. So Alphina tried to kill her. My word... It's exactly the kind of barbaric plan you *would* concoct, Princess Alphina."

Her mother's eyes widened in surprise.

Of course, this was a baseless accusation. She hadn't met with the neighboring prince since they'd graduated from school. On top of that, she'd never thought of assassinating the Saint. In the past, Alphina had stated these facts many times. However, no one had paid an iota of attention to her. She had never even been taken to court before Lionett's father, Emperor Taiga IV, ordered her execution.

On all previous loops, her classmate Kithling had been the same as he was currently. And yet now, she heard a different voice.

(There's absolutely no way that Princess Alphina would do something as shady

as plotting an assassination! She's the type of person who does everything fair and square, no matter the situation. If anyone's shady, it's the Saint, right? How could His Majesty and His Highness have jumped to conclusions like this?!)

Alphina was panicked. Both the prince and Kithling were thinking the complete opposite of what they said. Why were they behaving so paradoxically?

No, wait, get a hold of yourself, Alphina.

This was the first time she'd experienced this in her hundred repeats, but she could not freak out. She had decided that, no matter what happened to her, she wouldn't lose her pride. She would keep her head high and not feel ashamed of herself, no matter how much she was attacked. This was her pride as someone who had been framed ninety-nine times.

"Very well, then." Alphina straightened her back with an easy smile. She faced the prince head-on and slapped a hand against her chest. "I, Alphina Shinn Sylvana, will neither run nor hide. It doesn't matter if it's the emperor or Xenos. Just try and judge me! Understand?!" *Now, look at me with your usual glare, Your Highness! Insult me as you normally do, Kithling! Call me out for being such an arrogant woman!* With that thought in mind, Alphina prepared herself. But the inner voices she heard said...

(Beautiful...)

(How dignified...)

Huh?

(That passionate soul, burning as bright as her crimson hair! I knew that Alph was the only woman suited to be my fiancée! There's no one else for me! Oh, Alphina!)

(What an awe-inspiring figure she is. Her sophistication and purity are the same as when she was in school! My goodness! Ahh! Oh my goodness!)

Wait. Um. I'm not sure how to feel about all that?

Alphina had been taken to the palace, and then she was locked away on the

highest floor of a shabby tower in the corner of the vast garden. It was a poor excuse for a room, with only a single tiny window. That she hadn't been locked away in the dungeon was only due to her status as the duchess's daughter.

Everything happened exactly as it had the previous ninety-nine times. But Alphina was in for another surprise when she heard the hearts of the guards who were watching over her...

(Huh? Princess Alphina? Assassinate the Saint? Ridiculous!)

(Princess Alphina's the only one who talks to underlings like us.)

(Are they stupid? The one who oughta be locked away is that arrogant Saint!)

These were the men who would roughly drag Alphina up to the guillotine. She'd thought based on their violent deportment that they hated her, but it seemed that the truth was the exact opposite.

Just what is happening?

After having died ninety-nine times, Alphina had confidence that most things would not shock her. Once, the wheel had fallen off her cart on the way to the execution site, and she had fallen into the river and drowned. Suffice it to say, she considered herself prepared for any unexpected situation.

But this was simply too much.

In any case, let's calm down. Calm down, Alphina. Deep breaths. Right, you can do it...

She sat down in a rickety chair and steadied her breathing.

Let's think things through for now.

It seemed that the hundredth Alphina had gained some special power—the ability to hear the inner voices of other people. Hearing Lionett and Kithling during her sentencing last night had not been a figment of her imagination. She could choose to not listen to someone if she willed it, so one could say that she had perfect control over this ability.

And using this power had enabled her to uncover an enormous truth. The entire time, she'd thought that no one listened to or believed her words. But it seemed that everyone had considered Alphina innocent all along. That was

something worth celebrating. But truthfully, she was only more confused.

If that was the case, then why must she be executed? Aside from that question, there was something else that she noticed. *I don't know why, but I feel super energetic!*

After she'd slept for a night, she noticed that her physical condition was exceedingly hale. Alphina had always been healthy and had never fallen sick even once in all ninety-nine of her lives. But in this life, she was particularly full of vitality.

It was not just her energy; her magical power was overflowing as well. Compared to her prowess in sports, magic had never been her strong suit. But now, she felt like she could even master intermediate-level magic.

Could she test it on something? There was no way she could use Fireball or Tornado in a room as small as this. As such dangerous thoughts ran through her mind, a small shadow passed through the edge of Alphina's vision.

It was the white cat that lived in this tower.

His fur was well-groomed, despite being a stray. He had a slender body and scarlet eyes as beautiful as rubies. Perhaps he had been some noble's pet. He always showed himself after she'd been locked in this tower, and so she was familiar with him.

Next thing Alphina knew, she heard, *"It seems like you've awoken to your power, Lady Alphina."*

A voice sounded from the meowing cat. Alphina could scarcely believe her own ears. She looked around her, but there was no one else in the room except for herself and the cat. The guards were all crowded down in the lower floors and wouldn't come here unless summoned.

"It's hardly a surprise, is it? Didn't you hear plenty of people's inner voices on your way here?"

Alphina scrutinized the white cat as he slunk up to her feet.

"Kitty, are you the one talking to me?"

"Please, call me Scarlet." The cat gave his name in a calm voice. It was strange

to call it a voice, but that was how it sounded in Alphina's head.

"There is no need for you to speak out loud. You simply have to think it in your mind, and you can converse with me."

Swallowing her surprise, Alphina smiled at the cat. *"Nice to meet you, Scarlet."*

"Likewise, Lady Alphina."

"Let's cut to the chase. You know something, don't you? Could you tell me everything you know about what's happening to me?"

"Understood."

The white cat known as Scarlet stared straight at her with his red eyes like rubies and started to talk.

"I am a familiar created by your grandmother, Lady Yulinar."

"My grandma?! No wonder..."

Yulinar Finn Sylvana—Alphina's grandmother, who had died when she was ten years old—had been court magician for the empire. She had been particularly skilled with application spells and had multiple animal familiars. Many had called her the best mage in the empire.

Even now, her image was burned into the backs of Alphina's eyelids. She could remember her grandmother's kind smile. Yulinar's house had been located in a forest which belonged to no country, and she'd spent the twilight of her years surrounded by flowers and animals.

Despite holding the lofty position of court magician, she'd remained humble. She had even been relentlessly kind to the tomboyish Alphina, which Alphina had been grateful for because she'd always been scolded by her mother.

"If you're my grandma's familiar, then I can understand why you have this mysterious power. Do you also know that I've repeated my life a hundred times?"

"A hundred times, you say?!" Scarlet's smooth tail shot up and stood high in

the air. *“Lady Alphina, you’ve been blessed with the Loop spell. It activates upon your untimely demise, and it resets you back in time to a certain point. But my goodness, to think it’s been a hundred times.”*

“Is it really so surprising?”

“Yes. Lady Yulinar was the one who cast it upon you, but not even she anticipated that it would activate a hundred times. Experiencing a hundred deaths despite your innocence would have driven most people insane. It must have been an ordeal.”

“Is that so...?” Alphina didn’t think it was such a bad thing. After all, she could repeat her early twenties—the prime of her life—as many times as she wanted.

“Lady Yulinar cast Loop on you for your benefit. It’s not an ordinary time loop either. The more you go back, the stronger you become. You must be housing an impressive amount of power if this is your hundredth repeat! I have been waiting for the time of your awakening.”

“That certainly seems to be the case.”

It was true that an ancient grimoire in Alphina’s grandmother’s house had recorded one such spell granting the magic to hear another’s inner voice—Telepathy. But she had never imagined that she would learn how to use it.

“Did Grandmother expect this to happen to me?”

“Yes, in the vaguest sense. Lady Yulinar often told me that no matter how many times she tried to read your future, she saw a bright light standing in your way.”

“The bright light is Saint Debonaire, right?”

Scarlet’s tail waved as if he was nodding. *“That Saint is wielding her powerful light magic for evil purposes. She’s using it to restrict others’ movements and control them.”*

“So you’re saying that she can force people to do things that they don’t really mean to?”

“That’s right. When she had an audience with the emperor, she cast the ancient spell Geis on the prince and nobles who were present. She even used it

on the guards. It's a forbidden spell that forces people to obey her will. Everyone has become the Saint's puppets."

If what Scarlet said was true, then everything that had occurred so far clicked into place. Ever since the Saint's arrival, the emperor had become a completely different person. He had started to ask for her advice on politics, government business, and even military affairs, as if he had become her yes-man.

The Saint and her glowing beauty had ensnared the entire country, starting from the upper rung—yes, even that stubborn mule, Prince Lionett...

"But it didn't look like my mother was being controlled by her."

"The Saint's magic works especially well on men. It must not work as well on women because she's focusing all of her attention on controlling the men she particularly likes."

"Huh..." Alphina sighed.

"I can't believe it. She's less a Saint and more a boy-crazy witch!"

Though Debonaire was her enemy after having framed her so many times, Alphina acknowledged her skills. The Saint had command over a wide variety of light magic, and she was eloquent too. More than anything, she was elegant and delicate—all attributes that men liked.

In contrast to that, Alphina was vulgar and free-spirited, with no hint of refinement at all. She was the kind of person who preferred racing around a field on horseback over admiring the flowers in the imperial villa's garden. Because of that, she had thought it made sense why Prince Lionett chose the Saint over her, but...

"I'm furious," Scarlet said, his eyes glowing. *"It's foul how she has framed you with a crime you never committed so she can steal your status as the prince's fiancée! What unimaginable corruption from someone who's supposed to serve Lord Xenos! We must let her realize the weight of her sins."*

"Right..."

Unbidden, Alphina turned her gaze to the small window. Outside, there was a pair of birds resting on the red roof of the royal palace. When her eyes met

theirs, the birds chirped adorably and, in a show of friendship, took flight together. They spread their wings and effortlessly climbed higher towards the sky, carried by the gentle breeze. It was the very soul of freedom.

“I’d like to clap back against that Saint! But afterwards, I want to live my life in freedom.”

“In freedom, you say?”

“I want to live somewhere on the outskirts of the empire. Not as Princess Alphina, but as a completely different person. I’ve already lived ninety-nine times. I’m tired of looking at this castle, and I don’t need any fancy jewels or dresses. I’m sick of the mind games in high society. I want to live with the trees and the animals, like my grandmother did.”

Scarlet blinked his red eyes. *“If that is your wish, Lady Alphina, then it is my command. But how will you do it?”*

“There’s a Substitute spell that my grandmother used to use, right? With my powers as they are now, can I use it?”

“Yes. It should be simple.”

“Then let’s use that to create my body double and have it be executed in my place. The real me will live as free as a bird in my grandmother’s forest. How’s that?”

Scarlet meowed happily. *“So you will walk the same path that Lady Yulinar did. I will follow you until the end... But is that really all right?”*

“Is what?”

“If you chase away the Saint, then you can return to being Prince Lionett’s fiancée. With time, you would become the empress.”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t need that. I’m sick of it!”

Scarlet may have known everything, but he was not the one who’d repeated this life ninety-nine times. Alphina was. He must not have been able to fully understand just how much she had become disillusioned with status and glory.

“I shall bring you a grimoire from the house that Lady Yulinar left behind. You should be able to learn what you need for Substitute, as well as how to cast it,

after you read it."

"Thanks, I'll leave that to you... But can you really do that when you're a cat?"

"Please do not worry about that."

Scarlet's slender body was enveloped in a pale light. The light gradually became larger and, eventually, transformed into the shape of a human.

"Wow..." Alphina's eyes widened.

Standing before her was a beautiful, slim boy dressed in a butler suit. He looked like he was around ten years old, so about the same age as her younger brother, Carl. His white hair gave off a pure impression that made him seem unapproachable, but his eyes when he gazed upon Alphina were gentle.

He was a handsome young boy, no matter how you looked at him. But his alluring red eyes were undoubtedly those of the loyal white cat.

Scarlet, now in the form of a human, kneeled in a show of respect. "Lady Alphina, would you allow me to show my loyalty to you through a kiss?"

"Of course."

It was a little embarrassing, but then again, Alphina would be counting on him for various tasks going forward. The gentle sensation of his lips lingered on the back of her hand.

"Speaking of which, it seems like I can't hear your inner voice," she said.

"I am a being born from magic, and so I am not as complicated as a human. There is no contradiction between what I say and what I feel. I have nothing to hide, and I'm filled only with my respect and loyalty for you, Lady Alphina!"

Scarlet puffed his chest out proudly. Alphina could practically hear his self-satisfied hum, and she smiled.

He was so dignified as a cat, but he's pretty childish as a human. It looks like he's around Carl's age, so it's kind of adorable.

"What's the matter, Lady Alphina?"

"Oh, nothing."

She shook her head, and at that moment, she heard the familiar sound of

footsteps climbing up the stairs. There was only one person who would visit her at this hour and with this timing.

She had repeated this ninety-nine times, so Alphina knew that *she* had come.

“It seems like an uninvited guest has come by. Again.”

“A guest? Is it—?”

“Scarlet, turn back into a cat and hide in the shadow of that shelf.”

At the same moment that Scarlet, who’d returned to his white cat form, hid himself away, the door of the room opened. And the person who entered was —

“Oh, Princess Alphina! How tragic!”

It was Saint Debonaire Lua Lightmist, dressed up in pure white robes.

Her skin was so white and smooth it was like high-quality milk. Her eyes resembled a pair of clear lakes, and her blonde hair was so pale that it was like mist.

Debonaire’s beauty could be summarized with a single word: delicate. Yes, delicate. She was a fragile maiden who would spark any man’s chivalric desire to protect her.

The Saint rushed to Alphina’s side and held her hand with both of her own.

“This must be some kind of mistake! There is simply no way that you would plot my assassination. Both His Highness and His Majesty must have misunderstood something. I, Debonaire, swear on the name of Lord Xenos that I shall protect you.” Like she had for the past ninety-nine times, Debonaire rattled off her flowery and saintly speech.

“Thank you, Debonaire. I’m really happy that you care about me.” As she replied with her usual line, Alphina attuned her ears to Debonaire’s inner voice and heard...

(Serves you riiiiiiiiiiiiight!!!!!!! Princess Assphina! Squee hee hee!)

Uh...

Wait, wait... Just wait a second...

Squee hee hee? What kind of laughter was that?

Just how far would I have to trek to find a bird that sings like that? I kind of want to look into it, though.

(Ahhh, I can hardly contain myself! Like, totally can't contain myself!!! Look at you, all beaten down after being tossed into this FILTHY room!!! How does it feel knowing that I stole your stud of a fiancé? Hey, how do you feel right now? HEEEEYY, how do you FEEL? Squee hee!!!)

Um, I'm not beaten down. I'm just shocked at what you're really like...

Ignorant of the fact that Alphina could hear her inner voice, tears even welled up in the Saint's doe-like eyes. "Please, never give up hope. I will do my best to help you!" After a pause, she continued, "Oh, but it's so painful. I cannot stop crying...!"

(No, not yet, Debonaire... You can't laugh just yet...! You have to wait until this woman's head pops off her neck...! But...pfft...pfft, hee hee... I-I can't stop laughiiing. ≡)

It kind of...sounded like the squealing of a pig...

Alphina had long thought that Debonaire's personality was the complete opposite of her looks. However, she'd never imagined that the difference would be so drastic. She had guessed in all ninety-nine lives that Debonaire's tears were an act, but to think she'd been holding back laughter. Yulinar used to say, "Truth is stranger than myth," and she had been absolutely correct.

Unlike her pure appearance, Debonaire's heart was absolutely vile. The inside of the delicate and fragile Saint was a pigsty.

After the Saint left, sobbing all the while, Scarlet emerged from his hiding spot.

"So how were the Saint's true feelings, Lady Alphina?"

"Beyond my imagination!"

Debonaire was a woman of peerless beauty, but once you got past her outer layer, she was nothing special. It seemed that even with the blessing of Dite, the

goddess of beauty, one might still be impure of heart as well. Regardless of how powerful her light magic was, it was unbelievable how the men of this country could have been duped by a woman as two-faced as Debonaire.

“There’s no future for a country that a sow like her can play like a fiddle. I want to hurry up and get out of here.”

“I agree.”

Alphina no longer had any intention of getting herself involved in an empire ruled by that so-called Saint. She wanted to cut everyone off and get her freedom as fast as she could.

In order to do so, she had to prepare the Substitute that would be beheaded in her place before her execution date...

Three days after the pig—I mean—the Saint’s visit, Alphina had been dragged to the audience chamber in order to be questioned by the emperor himself.

Prince Lionett was obviously present, as were Saint Debonaire and Kithling. Alphina’s family had also been ordered to attend. It was to be a royal trial in the presence of an audience.

“Those are all of the charges against you. Princess Alphina, if there is anything you wish to state in your defense, then speak it now,” said the emperor.

“There is nothing.”

A sigh of relief rose from the noblemen watching. No doubt they thought that in the face of the emperor, Alphina had no way of talking herself out of this.

Unfortunately, that was not the kind of girl Alphina was.

“I don’t have a defense. However, I have lots to say about how strange this all is.” She raised her head and stared sternly at the emperor. “Everyone says that I was plotting the Saint’s assassination, but where’s the proof? Isn’t it all just a baseless rumor? Precisely when did the empire become a place where you could execute someone without evidence, all because they’re in the way?”

Mutters rose from the noblemen.

They must have assumed that Alphina would easily admit her guilt. There was no way that a princess like herself would dare argue with the emperor to his face...or so they'd probably thought. All of them could only think based on titles and status.

Incidentally, Alphina had tried to graciously own up to her crimes on the thirteenth loop. It had been out of curiosity—she'd wondered what would happen if she said, "I was just in a silly, goofy mood and decided that I would try and kill her! Sooo sorry!"

The result? "Hm. I knew it. Off with your head!"

After that, there was no way she would admit to anything.

"Isn't the Saint's testimony more proof than anything else would be?" the bald-headed minister of justice asked. "She's said on multiple occasions that she felt like her life was in danger. Moreover, she testified that she saw you having secret meetings with the prince of a neighboring country."

"And I'm saying that there's no concrete evidence to back that testimony up. 'The Saint thought this,' and, 'The Saint saw that.' That's all you have, isn't it? Am I to be tried for a crime based on guesswork?"

"Stop with your excuses, Princess Alphina. It's an unforgivable act to suspect such a thing from the Saint. She is a servant of Lord Xenos."

Alphina sighed dramatically and shook her head. "Minister...if the Saint ordered you to die, would you?"

The minister of justice's face turned as red as a steamed lobster. The surrounding nobles shouted angrily in turn.

"How could you say such a thing in front of His Majesty?!"

"What an impudent woman, trying to discredit the Saint after what you've done!"

"A heretic who doesn't even fear Lord Xenos!"

Hee hee. I'm such a villainess!

If she no longer cared about what happened next, then this hellish situation was surprisingly fun. Now, she thought it high time to listen to this minister's

inner voice...

(Nope, you're absolutely right, Princess Alphina! Totally correct! I think it's really weird too. Like, there's no evidence at all! I wondered what sort of nonsense the Saint was spouting! However! My mouth won't listen to me! For some reason, I can only say things to protect the Saint and punish you. Please forgive me! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!)

The minister of justice repeated his apologies at top speed.

In the past, Alphina had been furious at him. *What a stubborn crustacean! And you call yourself a lawyer?!* she'd thought. But it seemed that he was surprisingly cowardly yet sweet on the inside. Maybe if they'd had the chance to chat over tea, they could've been friends. Well, it wasn't as if she had the time in her past lives or in her current one.

For her hundredth execution, and the new life she would lead afterwards, Alphina made a single vow: *I'm going to make myself hated so that I won't have any regrets! I'm going all the way!*

The night previous, when she'd told the white cat, Scarlet, of her conviction, he had swished his tail as if confused. "Why would you do that? I don't want you to be hated, Lady Alphina."

"Well, just hear me out, Scarlet."

"All right," he said after a pause.

"If I die while everyone thinks that I'm actually a good person, then what do you suppose will happen?"

Scarlet was lost in thought for a while before he answered. "In reality, everyone does think that you're innocent, so I suppose they would suffer due to their conscience. I'm not sure when the Saint's spell will lift, but their pain would continue until then."

"That's it! And that's not good!"

Alphina crossed her arms in front of her chest to make an X. When she made grandiose gestures such as this in front of her mother, she would get scolded for being improper. But lately there had no longer been any need to care about

that.

“That’s the part that troubles me,” she added. “It’ll be easier if everyone just immediately forgets about me after my execution. I’m going to start a new life. I don’t need *anything* tying me down.”

“I don’t agree with that. The people should repent for the rest of their lives for executing you because of a crime you didn’t even commit! The anniversary of your death should be a statutory holiday, and the emperor and nobles should visit your grave every year and apologize!”

“Ew, gross, what?” Just the mental image of the nobles forming a gloomy line in front of her grave every year was irritating.

Alphina wanted to start a new life in her grandmother’s forest. It would be more convenient, in all manners of speaking, if everyone quickly forgot about the tomboyish princess. The fastest way to ensure that would be to make sure they all hated her.

“Man, but she was a terrible person.”

“Let’s all forget about her and enjoy the rest of our lives.”

“Understood!”

“Yay!”

That level of casualness would be preferable. Incidentally, the characters she’d imagined in her head to play out that little skit were Kithling and the prince, but she didn’t suppose that Lord Cold Heart would ever be caught dead saying something like “Yay!” In any case...

Alphina was prepared to go all in for her role as a villainess. This time, she directed her glare at Emperor Taiga IV, who reclined in his throne with his crown upon his brow.

“You’re just as bad, Your Imperial Majesty!”

“I am? How so?”

“Ever since the Saint appeared, you’ve become so slovenly that you’re practically a different person! It’s unseemly how you always ogle her! I’m sure that Empress Nadia, may she rest in peace, is rolling in her grave!”

The emperor said nothing.

Whoa, I'm so disrespectful!

No matter how much Alphina disregarded decorum, she had never, in all ninety-nine lives, said anything so daring to the emperor.

Unlike the frosty prince, Emperor Taiga was known to have a lightning-fast temper. More than one or two servants had been executed simply because they got on his nerves. Alphina prepared herself for his fearsome rebuke.

(Princess Alphina, you are acting truly—TRRR-U-LY—fearlessly! I commend you!)

Er... I've been commended...

(What an impressive young woman. She doesn't seem afraid of her impending execution at all. I'd expect nothing less from Yulinar's granddaughter. She even has the guts to speak her mind to me. And without an ounce of fear! The woman I chose for Lionett's political marriage has such talent! I deemed her suitable to become his wife, and yet she must be executed...! What a massive loss for our empire!)

Um...? Your Imperial Majesty, are you seriously thinking that?

Alphina really wanted to open her mouth and ask that question out loud. She'd thought that after the Saint had seduced the emperor, he'd lost all interest in her. Yet here he was, praising Alphina so much that she could hardly keep a straight face.

In place of the emperor, who had fallen silent, the old general with a monocle over his eye opened his mouth. "Is that all you wish to say, Lady Alphina?"

"Er...yeah." She ended up making a halfhearted response.

Then, she listened for the general's real feelings on the matter.

(Why are both His Imperial Majesty and His Highness placing their trust in the Saint's nonsense when there isn't a single scrap of real proof?! They must be insane if they want to execute Lady Alphina. Could they have been put under a spell? Tsk, my mouth and my body aren't cooperating either!)

He was a mess.

Alphina had wanted to play up the villainess act more. But now she found herself buried underneath all the compliments.

Seeing that Alphina was no longer saying anything, the minister of justice whispered something into the emperor's ear. The latter nodded solemnly and spoke in such a loud voice that his white mustache quivered with every word.

"Alphina Shinn Sylvana, I sentence you to death!"

It was the exact same as all of the prior loops. Alphina had grown tired of this particular event, and yet there was no new development on this hundredth time either.

Prince Lionett stared at Alphina with his cold eyes, and Kithling smiled cynically. Debonaire wailed and collapsed in tears. Alphina's father knelt to the ground and attempted to offer half of his land to the emperor as an apology. Her mother collapsed and had to be escorted outside by the guards. Her younger brother, Carl, stood completely still, his stony expression unchanging, and the nobles watched the drama with keen interest.

It was a farce. Just the same as it had always been.

The only thing that was different was that now she could hear everyone's inner voices. For example, these were Kithling's thoughts as he stood next to the prince:

(Is he an idiot? Like, is the emperor an actual idiot? Does he seriously intend on executing Lady Alphina? I don't know what sorcery has been cast upon us all, but can someone like that really be the ruler of the great Lione Empire? Yes, of course I know that I'm putting myself on a pedestal, and yes, I know that I'm useless. I super know that; every night, I stand in front of the mirror and slap myself silly—ow, ow, ouch! Look, aren't my cheeks red? This redness represents the passion I have for Lady Alphina, but it's painful that I can't express it. Like, you understand, right? So the moral of the story is—is the emperor an idiot?)

Right. Sorry, Kithling. I'm glad you're sticking up for me, but you're terrifying.

Upon closer look, Kithling's cheeks had red handprints on them. Alphina looked away from her classmate.

Prince Lionett's inner voice was much more earnest than Kithling's.

(Alphina received the death penalty? She'll...die? I can't imagine a world without her. Just how cold would such a place be? She was the only woman for me. If she is to die, then I won't mind spending the rest of my life alone. I'll give up my crown so that I don't have to worry about an heir. A world without Alphina just doesn't matter...)

He internally declared his tragic resolve.

Er, Your Highness, why are you so sad?!

To think that the Golden Sword, who was infamous for his stubborn refusal to open his heart to anyone, had such a soft side to him! And she had no idea how to feel about herself being the cause behind it. Did he really feel that a world without her wouldn't matter? Without thinking, Alphina stared straight at him.

"Alphina, it's useless to beg for mercy from me," the prince said with a cross expression. "We're no longer engaged to each other."

(Oh, Alph is looking at me... She must be begging for my help. Why won't my body listen to me? I can't even rescue my beloved childhood friend—the woman I love. You're a coward, Lionett Lione!)

Now, now, there's no need to blame yourself like that. The words of comfort almost slipped right out of her.

Next, it was time to hear the inner thoughts of her younger brother, Carl Mann Sylvana. What was hiding behind that calm and composed pale face?

(My sister. Executed? She'll die? I won't get to see her anymore? That can't be true. I...won't believe that...)

Though it was only within his heart, his tears flowed constantly.

She never thought that her little brother, who had watched his older sister's execution all ninety-nine times in expressionless silence, had been feeling this way. People said that he'd forgotten his emotions in their mother's womb in exchange for his overwhelming magical talent. And even Alphina, his sister, had only heard Carl's voice a few times in his ten years. To think that on the inside, he was so lonely and cared about his sister so much!

Then... Then I should've paid more attention to him!

On one hand, she felt happy that all of the love she'd poured upon him had been reciprocated. On the other, she could not ignore the regret that he hadn't asked for more from her. She wanted to run over to him and give him a hug, but she held herself back, steeling her resolve.

Carl would have to shoulder the Sylvana family from now on. He had to overcome the grief of his sister's death and grow up into a proper man. So as his sister, Alphina did the last thing she could for him. "Your Imperial Majesty. If I may, I have but a single request."

"Speak it."

"Let me be the only one who's punished. I beg that this does not affect the Sylvana family."

"Hmm. You wish for your family's safety and not a lighter sentence?"

Alphina nodded nobly. "I shall shoulder my own crime. It has nothing to do with my family. In particular, the empire will have need of my brother, Carl, in the future. Your Imperial Majesty, please take that into consideration. Please..."

"Very well. I accept your request," the emperor said with a solemn nod.

"Thank you so much. In that case...I no longer have any regrets."

Alphina kind of felt like, in the end, she'd become a good person in the eyes of the public, which messed up her plans. But she wanted to ensure that no harm would come to her family. That was something she had always made sure to do in all ninety-nine loops thus far.

This long tragedy... No, this long farce would finally come to an end. Right when she thought that...

"Please wait, Your Imperial Majesty!"

As if she'd been waiting for just the right cue, the sow appeared. She gracefully stepped forward, her pale blonde hair bouncing behind her. Debonaire looked around at the nobles gathered in the hall and, after dramatically stretching out the silence, opened her mouth.

"All this time, Lady Alphina has served both the emperor and the empire with utmost loyalty," she exclaimed. "Shouldn't we reconsider sentencing her to

death just because of a single mistake?”

Though she spoke as if she were trying to protect Alphina, her inner thoughts told a different story.

(Heh heh. Well? Aren't I just the kindest? I'm scoring tons of affection points by trying to protect a disgusting woman who attempted to kill me. Even if I dispelled the Geis right this second, dearest Lio would probably be head over heels for me. Squee hee!)

Well, whatever you say... But is there nothing you can do about the way you laugh? Every time I "hear" it, I think my "heartdrums" are gonna explode.

“Saint, that is the one request I cannot grant, even if it comes from you. Tensions are high with our neighboring Heavenrose, and there is no way we can ignore a conspiracy like assassination. We will make her pay the highest price, on behalf of this empire’s dignity.” Despite his respectful words, the emperor’s inner thoughts were another story.

(Doesn't she have any shame? I mean, wasn't the Saint the one who started that rumor in the first place?)

“Oh no...! Your Imperial Majesty! Please! Show some mercy!”

(That's right, Your Majest-hee. That's the spirit. Now, it's time to talk me up! Praise me more! Compliment me in front of my sweet Lio!)

“Oh, Debonaire. So kind, even to the woman who plotted your assassination... You truly are a natural saint. You’re simply the perfect bride for Lionett,” said the emperor outwardly.

(NOOOO!!! I don't want this fake asshole of a girl to be my daughter-in-law! I want Alphie-poo!!!)

Alphie-poo?

Even the emperor’s personality was starting to crumble. It was truly frightening how far the Saint’s influence had spread. Sensing that the situation was starting to get out of hand, Alphina opened her mouth.

“I am very grateful for your consideration, Saint. However, I’ve already made up my mind. I’ve lived my life without exercising the proper etiquette. But at

the very end, won't you allow me to depart this world with dignity?"

With as much respect as she could, Alphina lowered her head. And as she did so, she heard the inner voices of the nobles around them.

(Hmm, Princess Alphina, I have but one word to say: impressive.)

(She's only twenty, and yet she's maintaining such composure in the face of her death. It's amazing!)

(Are we sure that we aren't making some foolish mistake here?)

(If news of this reaches outside of the empire, how would our neighbors, such as Prince Avenlock, respond?)

But an ear-piercing laugh suppressed the compliments, ringing out in Alphina's mind.

(HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!! HEEEEECK YEAAAHHHHHH!!! I SNAGGED MYSELF A HANDSOME PRINCE! I'M THE FUTURE EMPRESS! SQUEE HEE HEEEEEE!!!)

She was so terrible that it was almost refreshing. One would have never guessed that Debonaire was cheering so rambunctiously on the inside as she covered up her delicate, beautiful face with a pure white handkerchief.

"Truth is stranger than myth," for real. Squee hee.

Alphina's public execution, which marked the hundredth time her head would go rolling, was to be held in two weeks.

Until then, she remained locked in the tower. But she was still able to get a certain amount of food and supplies. Others, for instance, could bring her gifts; it was meant to be a form of mercy for the princess, who had nothing to do except wait for her demise.

Alphina asked Scarlet to find her a number of things: the wings of a paper kite butterfly from the Amazone Forest, blighted Azure Rowan leaves from near the dungeon to the east, some ordinary yarn, and evergreen wood. They were all materials she needed to make a body double for herself.

Using the items, she created a little doll and breathed magic into it. After she

did so, the doll came to life as an intricately detailed puppet. It looked just like Alphina, even down to her height.

“Amazing! You can hardly tell the difference between us. Scarlet, I knew I could count on you.”

“It’s all thanks to Lady Yulinar’s instructions and your own powerful magic, Lady Alphina.”

Still in the form of a cat, Scarlet lowered his head. His tail was twitching happily.

“So this puppet will be executed in my place, right?”

“Yes. We’ll take that opportunity to escape and flee to Lady Yulinar’s old hideout in the Amazone Forest. We can decide what to do from there after we arrive.”

“We’ll be able to do whatever we want, whenever we want!”

“So, Lady Alphina. What kind of revenge do you plan on taking against the Saint?”

“Hmm...”

Alphina withdrew her magic. Her look-alike puppet returned to its original doll form.

“In order to use magic like this, I need a medium, right? Something like this doll.”

“Yes. You cannot use powerful magic without a medium. Things like gems, crystals, or the staffs that magicians use all count.”

Her grandmother, who had been the court magician, had always wielded a beautiful staff. It was made out of a mysterious material that was neither metal nor wood and enabled her to cast a wide variety of spells with but a single wave.

“So when the Saint uses Geis, she must be using it through a medium too, right?”

“Most likely. If the spell is so strong that it can affect everybody in the court,

then it should be quite complex magic. She must have prepared an appropriately powerful medium."

"Would it be something that she could dispose of after she uses it?"

Scarlet thought for a moment before he answered. *"No. She can't turn the Geis off for even a second, so she must be carrying the medium around with her as we speak."*

If that was the case, then Alphina could guess what the most likely culprit was. *"Could it be that circlet on her head with the huge emerald? It's proof that she's a servant of Lord Xenos. The Saint is always wearing it."*

"It sounds plausible. A jewel of that quality would be very effective as a medium. And considering her status as the Saint, it wouldn't seem out of place if she wore it all the time either."

"Then if we destroy it...that would dispel her Geis, right?"

"That's true!" Scarlet leapt at Alph's feet. *"I never expected anything less from you, Lady Alph; that's a wonderful suggestion. I can already imagine the Saint panicking!"*

If Debonaire's Geis was dispelled, then she wouldn't be able to become the prince's fiancée. He and the others would return to normal, and her entire plan would go up in flames.

"But...that's not interesting enough."

Alphina had been killed by Debonaire ninety-nine times at this point, after all. She wanted to return the favor. This was not revenge. This was Alphina finding closure so that she could start a new life. The way she saw it, she could make the Saint properly repent for all of her crimes and then begin a new chapter for herself.

"Lady Alph, what are you thinking?" Scarlet asked, tilting both his head and tail to the side.

Alphina smiled brightly at her loyal white cat. *"Let's let everyone hear how that little piggy squeals."*

Interlude: Lionett (1)

Fake, artificial—everything was false. Nothing in this court was real. Just when had Lionett Lione come to realize this truth?

Ever since he was born as the crown prince of the world-renowned Lione Empire, Lionett had lived his life feeling a bizarre sense of estrangement.

As an example, when he was nine years old, Lionett had drawn a rose for the annual art exhibition that his elementary school had organized. It wasn't a pretty picture. He hadn't been able to recreate the rose's complicated petals, and it ended up looking more like the mane of a lion. Even when he added the leaves and stem, it just looked like a lion with limbs.

It was embarrassing.

Lionett didn't want to submit it for the art exhibition, but he also felt that it would be cowardly to run. So he timidly handed it in to the teacher.

The teacher stared at the drawing and then smiled widely at Lionett. "Oh, what an amazing...rose! Prince Lionett, I knew you would do a fantastic job on this assignment!"

The teacher is lying! he thought. As proof, there had been a pause before she said the word "rose." It must have been because she had little confidence that was actually what the picture portrayed. So she had cautiously offered her praise while gauging Lionett's mood based on his facial expression.

His noble classmates all said similar things.

"Wow, Lord Lionett! What a unique...rose!"

"The...rose...that you drew is so elegant. To think that your talents extend into the arts as well!"

No one said what they actually felt. Everything was a lie—a fake. In his youth, Lionett had been hurt and angered by it, but his mother, Empress Nadia, comforted him.

“This is the responsibility of a future emperor, Lionett. A country whose ruler is regarded with fear rather than familiarity shall be much more stable. As the emperor, you must shoulder that loneliness. Though you seem strong, you’re surprisingly fragile. You must learn in childhood how to endure this solitude.”

Loneliness... Lionett was unable to understand the meaning of this word his mother had said. Loneliness? Weren’t they all just trying to flatter him? Was it an emperor’s responsibility to accept the empty praise of the people he had to govern?

Later on, when Lionett celebrated his tenth birthday, his mother, Nadia, passed away from an illness. A year after that, Lionett had the opportunity to learn for himself the meaning of her words. This time, he had drawn a picture of the sky. Upon seeing it, the daughter of a duchess said, “Oh my! The color of the ocean is so beautiful!”

At that moment, the temperature in the room dropped. The expressions of the teacher and students in the art room all tightened with panic, and they stared at the princess as if condemning a criminal. The princess immediately realized her mistake. She paled before Lionett’s eyes, cold sweat running down her face, and practically threw herself upon the ground to kneel.

“I... I apologize, Your Highness! Please! Please forgive me!”

“No, it is not your fau—”

“No! My eyes are useless! I apologize! *I apologize!*”

She trembled so violently that it was almost funny. And upon seeing her sorry state, Lionett had reached his revelation: *So this is the loneliness that my mother spoke of.*

His classmates were able to show each other their pictures and laugh together about how poor their drawings were. That was what it meant to be equals in a friendship. But Lionett had no such peer. He wasn’t allowed one. Even if Lionett himself was all right with having such a relationship, there was no one who wished to sit by his side.

Fine, then. I’ll play the part of the cold and frigid prince. I shall become an emperor feared by both the people and the other nations.

Lionett had never been the type to outwardly display his emotions. Nor was he particularly eloquent. People often misinterpreted his expression as one of anger, even though he had never been angry. Up to that point, he had always tried his best to explain himself and clear up the misunderstanding, but after that day, he stopped caring. He would turn from a relatable prince to a feared one—to the indifferent and cruel Lord Cold Heart.

His life had just taken a very sharp turn down a different path.

Lionett was a prodigy with a sword.

When he was twelve years old, right before he graduated elementary school, he had participated in a sparring match and won against the leader of the Imperial Guards. That man had been the most powerful swordsman in the country.

Ever since the incidents with the paintings, Lionett had stopped caring about the acceptance of his peers and focused more on his swordplay. If a prodigy trained more diligently than everyone else, then there was no way anyone could win against him. No one within the Lione Empire could beat him. The only one he might consider a rival was a neighboring prince who, at the same age as Lionett, had also been considered a prodigy at swordsmanship.

Lionett much preferred swords over people, as swords would never lie. The more you trained with one, the more your power grew. No matter who Lionett went up against, he never held back. Even when he obviously outclassed his opponent, he never looked down on or toyed with them. With an almost foolish straightforwardness, he defeated them with all of his strength—utterly and thoroughly trashed them with a vigor that bordered on extreme.

Because of that, Lionett's reputation for being frightening only grew.

"We should call him 'Lord Cold Heart.'"

"That young man is cold and cruel."

"Like a blade of eternal frost."

"His blue eyes are made of ice."

“Icy blood undoubtedly runs beneath that pale skin.”

Even when people talked about him in that manner, Lionett had been all right. *I don't need any friends. All I need is for them to kneel before me.*

The more that Lionett was feared by those around him, the more people said, “So long as Prince Lionett is the one inheriting the throne, the empire will be stable for another fifty years to come!” His dead mother had been correct; there was no need for the next emperor to be kind.

The incident happened in the spring of Lionett's second year of middle school. More precisely, it was during history class in his first period. The teacher, infamous for her strict attitude, had been in the middle of a dry lecture about the long conflict between the Lione Empire and its neighbor Heavenrose.

All of the children in the school were studious, so no one talked among themselves or napped during class. Since Lionett had received an elite education from childhood, it was a terribly dull lesson for him. But there was no way he could nap or skip class. No matter how bored he was on the inside, he needed to maintain a severe expression.

For crying out loud, is this world a living hell?!

In that moment, at the back of the solemn classroom, the window slowly and carefully opened up. This was the third floor, yet out from the open window, a hand suddenly sprouted. It seemed that somebody had climbed three floors and now planned on infiltrating the classroom. Because the teacher and students were all paying attention to the lesson, none of them noticed the disturbance by the window. Lionett was the only one watching.

From the open window, a red-haired girl slid her slender body inside. She was so adept, twitching her head this way and that in a skilled attempt at preventing her hair from getting caught. It was clear that she was used to this sort of mischief. Around when she was waist-deep into the classroom, Lionett's eyes met hers.

Neither of them said anything. Her shoulders jerked from the surprise, and then she placed a finger to her lips with a smile. “*Shh.*”

“Pfft.” After a long pause, air softly escaped from Lionett’s usually downturned lips.

What was that just now?! Lionett himself was shocked at the sound. He hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand. Through his palm, he was able to feel the vibrations of his cheeks.

Don’t tell me I almost laughed just now?!

While Lionett was in the midst of panic, the teacher finally noticed the girl.

“Hey, you! What are you doing there?!”

The girl leapt from the windowsill and landed easily on the ground. She held her skirt, which had become covered with grass stains and leaves, and curtsied.

“I am a new transfer student to this school, and today is my first day. My name is Alphina Shinn Sylvana!”

“Why are you transferring in from the window?”

“I was late, so I climbed a conveniently placed tree to attend my classes. I’d planned on sneaking in all casual, as if I’d been here the whole time, but it looks like I’ve committed a misstep!”

The students—and even the teacher—all started laughing. Lionett was the only one who *wasn’t* laughing. He didn’t have the capacity to.

Preposterous. There’s no way that I would almost laugh, let alone actually laugh! Something impossible has transpired.

That was the first humiliation he had experienced since the day he’d decided to become a feared prince rather than a beloved one. Not only that, but *she* had witnessed his smile as well! This was the greatest mistake of Lionett Lione’s entire life!

As Lionett clenched his fists in frustration, he felt his heart start to beat faster. It must have been because his anger presently had his emotions running high. That was what he told himself. And yet, for some reason, he hadn’t been able to get her mischievous smile out of his head.

House Sylvana was one of the older families within the empire. Three generations ago, the head of the house had lost a lot of its duchy in an investment gone wrong, so it had little power in spite of its high standing. Because the current duchess had a gentle and timid personality, it was not as prominent as the empire's other noble families.

A unique trait of House Sylvana was that it often produced powerful mages. Young Carl, who had been born several years ago, had scored extremely high on one of the magical aptitude tests. Even Lionett had heard rumors of him being a magical prodigy. And Lio knew very well of Yulinar Finn Sylvana, who had been the court magician. She'd passed away around the same time as Lionett's mother, and she had been a sophisticated and kind woman.

Though Lionett had heard that Yulinar had a granddaughter around his age, he'd never imagined that she was such a tomboy. The rumors of a transfer student who'd snuck in through the third-floor window spread like wildfire through the school. Alphina was the woman of the hour among both the boys and the girls. In a school for the noble families' little lords and ladies, this was hardly a surprise. She stuck out just like a sore thumb.

"Isn't she the daughter of the duchess? And just look at what kind of behavior she's engaging in!"

"To think she would climb a tree just to pretend that she wasn't late."

"This school is the most elite of the elite! It's no place for apes!"

"I'm sure Mistress Yulinar would be terribly upset if she were alive to see this."

Everyone said whatever they wanted to about Alphina. Around eighty percent of the students were critical of her. In Lionett's opinion, that was a given—there were six other dukes and duchesses in the empire, but all of their daughters were elegant and quiet. None of them were as rough-and-tumble as Alphina.

Eighty percent of the student body was critical. Put a different way, twenty percent of them were accepting of her.

"I think she's pretty interesting."

"She's always so cheery that she puts me in a good mood too!"

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say she’s beautiful, but just her presence brightens up a room. Maybe it’s because of her red hair.”

“Right? And she’s surprisingly charming when she smiles...”

BA-DUMP!

For some reason, whenever he heard those particular opinions, a loud noise would sound out from Lionett’s chest. It was the same noise as when Alphina had seen him smile. His chest felt tight, and his face burned hot. When met with such an unprecedented emotion, the man who was to be the next emperor was thrown into a panic.

One day, a princess from the same class as him asked, “Your Highness, what do you think about Princess Alphina?”

This princess had often leapt at any chance to speak with Lionett. According to rumors, she’d been aiming for the status of Lionett’s fiancée. It was easy to tell from the way she acted that she had confidence in her looks.

“I do not think anything of her. I have little interest in her.” Lionett’s voice when he answered was so cold that it felt as if he could turn the air into ice.

“Y-Yes, of course! My apologies.”

With a nervous, awkward smile, the princess backed off. Her face looked frankly hideous. Clearly, she’d tried to get Lionett to bad-mouth Alphina but hadn’t been able to.

This is the most beautiful girl in the higher nobility? She’s absolutely nothing like her.

After that, Lionett hadn’t been able to stop wondering: What was different between Alphina’s smile, which had burned itself into his retinas, and this ugly one? Why was it different? He wondered and pondered and ruminated. Thanks to that, his face scrunched up even more than usual, and he was feared all the more by his peers.

I don’t know. That was his only answer.

By this point, it had already been a year since his shocking meeting with Alphina. During that entire time, he’d barely exchanged any words with her.

Lionett became an aloof presence within the classroom, and she, for her part, was considered a headstrong girl. Since neither of them ever interacted with others more than necessary, one could say that they were fairly similar. But regardless, they'd never had a proper conversation.

Naturally, they would exchange greetings if they ran into each other.

"Lord Lionett, hello!"

"Right."

Such was the extent of their conversations. Their exchanges were nothing short of conventional, owing to his social standing as the crown prince and hers as a princess. However, Lionett longed to discuss something more with Alphina. He wanted to confirm whether or not she remembered that he'd almost laughed on that day.

Eventually, the perfect opportunity to do so came up.

The two of them had become third-years in middle school and joined the same committee—the Wilderness Committee. This organization's job was to preserve and maintain a small mountain owned by the school. Because members had to hike through the wilderness during both the summer and winter, it was an unpopular committee that no one wanted to join. They were in need of two members: a male one and a female one.

"Me, me! I'll do it!" Alphina volunteered, shooting her hand into the air so fast that it practically left behind a blurred afterimage.

Upon seeing her reaction, Lionett volunteered as well. His classmates were surprised, but Lionett had become so fervent in his desire to speak with Alphina that he hadn't even noticed them.

After school, the two of them were alone on the spacious mountain. Whenever Alphina found wildflowers, she would hold them up to the sun and compare them with the guidebook that she'd brought; otherwise, she tried to eat them. Whenever he watched her run about, her eyes sparkling, Lionett could not take his eyes off— No, Lionett observed her.

Then, it happened one temperate afternoon. The gentle spring breeze played with the long strands of Alphina's red hair. Every time it did so, Lionett found it

difficult to look away— I mean, Lionett observed her.

“Your Highness, do you know what this red flower is?”

“Humph. No.”

“It’s called an ‘alphina.’ It’s an incredibly hardy perennial plant, and you can use it either as a medicinal herb or as a medium for healing magic. On top of that, it can thrive anywhere, almost as strong as shepherd’s purse! My grandmother was inspired by this flower when she gave me my name!”

“Humph. I see,” Lionett said. Right there and then, he decided, *I’ll have my guards pick some one day and decorate my room with a whole hoard of them!* But next, he yelled, “No, no, no! That’s not what I came here to do!”

Upon seeing Lionett’s unconscious outburst, Alphina blinked at him in curiosity. “Your Highness, what’s the matter? What did you come here to do?”

“H-Humph...” Lionett coughed and prepared himself to accomplish the task that he’d set out to do. “Did you see it?”

“What?”

“I’m asking whether or not you saw it.” Even as he responded, Lionett was incredibly furious on the inside. *Why is this the only way I can ask things?! It feels just like an interrogation!*

“Um,” Alphina replied after a beat. “What, specifically, are you asking about?”
See?! You’re only making her confused!

Though Lionett had been approached countless times by women, this was the first time in his entire life that he’d attempted to talk to one himself. He had no idea what to say or how to say it. He heard rumors that his rival, Prince Avenlock of Heavenrose, went around flirting with nobles’ daughters and princesses from all around the world. Though he’d scorned Avenlock for his behavior, Lionett felt so painfully pathetic at the realization that he couldn’t even speak properly around Alphina.

“Like I asked... Did you see it?”

“And like I replied... See *what?*”

After a pause, Lionett asked again, “Did you see *it*?”

Alphina did not say anything.

Lionett cleared his throat several times in order to try and maintain some decorum in the situation, and Alphina stared at him strangely the entire time.

Eventually, she asked, “Your Highness, did you perhaps catch a cold?” She leaned forward, bringing her face close to his. In fact, they were so close that their foreheads almost touched.

BA-DUUUUUUUUUUUUUMP!!!

Lionett’s heart was beating harder than it ever had in his entire life, and yet outwardly, he maintained his “Lord Cold Heart” stoicism. He had no idea how to express the emotional magma boiling inside of him. To start with, he had no clue what this emotion even was, let alone what to call it.

Alphina stared at Lionett’s face while nodding to herself, and then she calmly took a few mysterious tools out from her bag. They were a small mortar and a short wooden stick—implements used for making medicine.

“Just give me oooooone minute, please!” With experienced hands, she harvested the alphina flowers. After washing her hands in a nearby creek, she ground up their roots, mixed them with water, and produced a pill.

“Alphina roots are good for soothing flushed skin. Please, give this a try. But by the way, I can’t guarantee that it’ll taste good! It’s bitter. Like, *super* bitter!”

Lionett took the pill from her. He slowly placed it on his tongue.

It’s bitter. And yet not at the same time.

His sense of taste had indeed recognized that the pill was “*super* bitter”—his lips felt like they were twisting into knots—but to Lionett, this taste was as sweet as ripe fruit. And the more he thought about how it was medicine that Alphina created just for him, the sweeter it tasted.

“Um, is it all right? If it’s too awful, you can spit it out,” she nervously said.

“Humph. It’s bitter,” Lionett murmured. Even in this moment, he wasn’t able to be honest with his feelings, and he cursed his own mouth for that.

After blinking her large eyes several times, Alphina let out a huff of laughter. “Jeez, I already told you that!”

The pill that should have been bitter still tasted like the sweetest of desserts as he continued to stare at the giggling Alphina. He started to wonder if the so-called “peach,” said to grow in faraway eastern countries, tasted like this pill.

How strange. She is so bizarre...

“By the way, Your Highness, what were you asking me if I saw earlier?”

“It’s...fine.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fine. Don’t ask me about that...”

Lionett had already understood just what this never-before-experienced feeling of his was. It was an incredibly powerful one; one that took up so much space in his chest that even the earth and the sky combined— No, even the entirety of the heavens, the earth, and the underworld combined would not be enough to encompass it.

As soon as he gave voice to it, everything he had built up as Lord Cold Heart would come crumbling down. Lionett could not be a normal man; therefore, he couldn’t deal with his emotions in a normal way. If the nobility and other countries thought of him as “Lord Lovestruck” or some such nonsense, then the empire itself would be put in danger.

So Lionett couldn’t say it. He had to swallow his emotions, which burned so hot they were like the fiery breath of a dragon. He would spend the rest of their school years by Alphina’s side as Lord Cold Heart.

Yet another year had passed since then.

Both Crown Prince Lionett and Princess Alphina had become first-years in the same high school, and they were also engaged to each other. It had been a veritable bolt from the blue. The entire empire had been shaken up by the sudden announcement.

“That tomboy is going to be the prince’s fiancée?! She’s not fit for the

position at all!”

“The only thing that crude woman has going for her is how much prestige her family has. Did she manipulate the prince by taking advantage of the fact they’re classmates?!”

Though all of the noble daughters who’d been aiming for the spot of Lionett’s fiancée for themselves had raised their voices in displeasure and criticism, there was a legitimate political reason for the engagement.

Lionett was summoned for an audience with his father, Emperor Taiga IV. He was told, “This is a political marriage. Do you understand that, Lionett?”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

He faced his father—and his father’s impressively severe silver beard—in the middle of the large conference room. At Taiga IV’s side was the empire’s trusty general, who had loyally served the country for many years. Other than the general, no one else was present. In other words, this was an unofficial and extremely secret conversation.

“For many years now, no woman has taken up the mantle as your fiancée. That was on purpose, because all of the nobles have been up in arms in trying to make their daughters into your bride. If I were to choose one of them, then it would bring unnecessary conflict and discord to the empire. In fact, you must know that more than I do.”

Lionett nodded. Ever since he had entered high school, a truly irritating number of nobles’ daughters had approached him. All of them wanted to be the wife of the next emperor. And among their numbers were girls who had been forced by their families to talk to Lionett. It was nothing but humiliating for him.

Of course, a large majority of those young ladies had ended up falling in love with Lionett thanks to his attractive face, but Lionett placed no particular value in his own appearance. It was something he had simply been born with, rather than something he’d obtained through his own skill and power.

“But Your Imperial Majesty, in that case, why did you choose Alphina Shinn Sylvana to be my fiancée? Please allow me to hear the reason.”

When Lionett had heard the name of his fiancée from his father, he thought

that he would collapse from a heart attack. He'd wanted to run out to the veranda and scream to the heavens, "*Could such a fortuitous thing really happen to me?*" But as he calmed down, he understood that things were not that simple—that he couldn't simply lose himself in his joy.

"The reason, you ask?" Back then, his father's beard hadn't been as marvelous as it was now, but he played with it with his fingers as he stared at his son's face. "The Sylvana family is in the shadows of high society. Now that the court magician Yulinar has passed, there are plenty of noble families with greater wealth and power. I heard that their recently born son is a magical prodigy, but it will take many years for him to mature and develop."

"So why, then?"

"Do you not understand, Lionett? It's precisely because they are in the shadows."

"I see," Lionett agreed after ruminating on the situation. Finally, he understood what his father was trying to say. "If the daughter of the Sylvana family—which is lesser than the other nobles in both wealth and power—is my wife, then the emperor can govern as he pleases without the meddling of the consort kin? Is that what you are trying to say?"

In lieu of the emperor, the general nodded.

"That's correct, Your Highness. Even if they've declined, House Sylvana still, for all intents and purposes, holds a high position within the court. There are people who look down on them as 'nobles in name only,' but that's precisely why they are perfect for you, Prince Lionett. Considering the situation, let us simply close our eyes to the princess's mannerisms."

"It's exactly as the general says," the emperor concurred. "Everything will be all right so long as she is healthy in body and spending habits. Isn't this Alphina girl your classmate? I've heard rumors that she's quite the little tomboy."

"Yes," Lionett said. "I hear her hobbies are hiking through the mountains and harvesting wild plants."

"Oh my," the emperor replied. "Considering Yulinar spent the twilight of her life in some forest on neutral ground, I cannot say I'm surprised. Well, isn't it

good to have such an outdoorsy hobby?”

Both the emperor and the general laughed. However, the prince did not.

“The both of you have extraordinarily good luck,” Lionett told them.

“Hm? What do you mean by that?”

“You’ve found the golden ticket, and you do not even realize it. It’s as if you’ve fished up a whale with nary a shred of the requisite experience or knowledge. What else could I call this aside from ‘good luck’?”

The two of them looked confused, but Lionett bowed to them and left the room. He knew that they would eventually come to learn how wondrous Alphina was. But right now, there were matters more pressing than that. Lionett had something that he absolutely must confirm.

The day after his meeting with the emperor, Lionett was walking through the school’s mountains with Alphina. It was just the two of them, and she had been the one to invite him this time: “Your Highness, would you like to take a walk through the mountains with me? It would be like what we did the other day.”

“Humph, I do not mind,” he answered. ...*Why must I start my sentences with “humph” whenever I speak with her? Am I cursed with a spell that will kill me if I don’t say that? Ah, yes, I actually would die. The moment that I say something like, “Of course I’d like to accompany you,” then I might just die—*

“Your Highness, you’ve been spacing out. Is something the matter?”

“Humph. I’m fine.”

Just like they’d done the other day, the pair walked through the mountains and enjoyed the spring air. Red alphina flowers bloomed here and there. In Lionett’s opinion, it was all remarkably beautiful—both the flowers and the girl’s scarlet hair bouncing by his shoulder. As Lionett remained silent, Alphina opened her mouth with an apologetic look on her face.

“You haven’t said a word this whole time. Is it because you’re dissatisfied with our engagement?”

Lionett didn’t say anything. He found himself unconsciously staring at her

face. She had no idea how much he wanted to yell, *“That should be my line! Are you really all right with someone like me? Can you be happy marrying a man who can’t converse without saying ‘humph’ at the beginning of his sentences?!”*

He opened and closed his mouth several times. There was no way he could actually ask her that. It was far too frightening a prospect, so the words simply wouldn’t come. What would he do if she said, *“I’m not pleased with this arrangement. There’s no way I could find happiness with a husband like yourself”*?

Who would believe it? That Lionett Lione—the most feared man in the empire—was terrified of hearing a girl’s answer. After a long pause, all he was finally able to squeeze out of himself was, “Humph. I’m not *not* dissatisfied. I was born as the heir to the Lione Empire, and I must fulfill the responsibilities that accompany that title. That’s all there is to it.”

“Huh, I see.” Alphina didn’t seem convinced. For a while, her face scrunched up as if in thought, but then she gave Lionett a relaxed smile. “In that case, why don’t we start by learning more about each other?”

“Humph. And how, specifically, do you propose we do that?”

“Let’s refer to each other by nicknames. Your Highness, I’ll call you ‘Lord Lio’ or ‘Sir Lio.’ So you may call me ‘Alph.’”

“Humph,” Lionett said after thinking about it. He brought to mind the image of the two of them calling each other “Alph” and “Lio.” *Oh... Oh no. My face... My face...! The corners of my lips won’t stop trying to twitch upwards!*

“Very well. That’s fine,” he answered.

“Then let’s start with that! I may not be as fancy as the other girls, but I hope that we can get along well, Lord Lio!”

“HUMPH. LIKEWISE, AL—” Lionett paused. “PHINA.” He spoke in such a stilted manner that he sounded like someone was physically pulling the words out of him.

“Remember? It’s ‘Alph’!” Alphina giggled softly, and Lionett looked away from her sulkily.

In the end, Lionett had been so embarrassed that he wasn't able to verbally call her "Alph." Perhaps she had been exasperated at him because of that, or she'd decided to match his formality. But she started to call him "Lord Lionett" as well at some point.

His own people feared him and called him Lord Cold Heart. Those outside of the empire dreaded him as the Golden Sword. And yet this pathetic display was his true identity. If there existed some sorcery that would allow its user to hear someone's inner voice, and they heard Lionett's true feelings, then he would certainly perish. He could only pray to the gods that Alphina would never obtain this hypothetical power.

Eventually, the two of them graduated from high school. Lionett had started going to war in an official capacity and continuously racked up prestigious military accomplishments. He made a name for himself amid the other great powers of the world. But the more glory he attained, the further apart he drifted from Alphina.

He passed his days reassuring himself that they were still engaged to each other and that, one day, they would get married. However, something unexpected happened after his twentieth birthday—Saint Debonaire appeared.

After she showed up, the empire went off the rails. All of the nation's men fell under her control, and Lionett was no exception. He was forced to act in ways that contradicted how he felt. The engagement that he'd been dying for this entire time was forcibly torn away from him.

At night, after the trial in which Alphina's execution had been decided by the emperor, someone knocked on Lionett's door as he hid away in his room.

"Lord Lionett, it's Saint Debonaire."

Upon hearing the voice behind the door, Lionett let out a sigh. It was unbearably rude to visit royalty's rooms at this hour, and without advance warning. If this were anyone else, they would have been stopped by the guards. However, there was no one in this court—nay, within the entire country—who

could say no to the Saint. Not even Lionett or the emperor could.

“Enter.”

“Pardon me.” The Saint quietly entered the room, swishing the sleeves of her pure-white robes as she did so. She stared straight into Lionett’s eyes with her delicate gaze. “I apologize for disturbing you at this hour. Am I a bother?”

Yes, you are. In truth, you’re such a bother that I would behead you where you stand. Despite those being Lionett’s true feelings, the words that came out of his mouth were, “I would never think of your visits as a bother, Saint. I’m always pleased to see you.”

This was what he’d meant earlier. Vapid lines that had nothing to do with Lionett’s real feelings would spill out of his mouth.

What in the world is wrong with me? Have I contracted some illness of the heart? Or maybe this is the effect of some strange magic? Could I have been put under the spell of some race of demons that was supposed to have died out centuries ago? If only Court Magician Yulinar were alive... She could have solved this mystery.

“Oh, I’m hardly deserving of such high praise,” the Saint said. Her red lips curled up into a hideous smile.

Debonaire was often called a beauty without compare, but Lionett had never once found her attractive. Everything about her seemed artificial to him. He felt that all of her words and actions had an edge of adulation to them. Lionett had already seen the real deal before—true beauty born from a natural heart and soul. It was nothing like this constructed perfection.

“So then, what brings you here, Saint?”

“This may be a tad presumptuous of me, but I was worried that you were feeling down, Your Highness. I came because I had hoped that you could distract yourself from your troubles through conversation with myself.”

“I see. Thank you,” he said. Meanwhile, he thought, *Seeing your face has put an even bigger damper on my mood.*

“Even though the two of you are no longer engaged,” the Saint continued,

“your former classmate will be put to death. You have my deepest sympathies.”

“I no longer think of Alphina as my classmate. She was conspiring to assassinate you with the neighboring prince. I cannot simply forgive that.”

There’s no way I’ll believe that. The Alphina I know would never commit a crime as cowardly as assassination. And to plan it with the neighboring pr— Well, I wonder.

The prince of the nearby kingdom of Heavenrose had studied as a transfer student at the empire’s high school for three years. Both of the princes and Princess Alphina had been classmates. Though Lionett had not heard anything about Alphina and the other prince being close during their school years, the prince was infamous for his flirty ways. It wouldn’t be a surprise if he had noticed Alphina’s charm.

“Oh, Lord Lio, what noble words. You certainly have the caliber to be the next emperor.”

“Thank you.”

How dare you so casually call me “Lio”? That’s a nickname I’ve only permitted Alphina to use.

“Even so,” Debonaire continued, “don’t you think that the emperor’s decision this time is too harsh? I never thought that he would have Princess Alphina’s own fiancé serve as her executioner.”

“What?” He thought he must have heard wrong. At his interrogating tone, the Saint blinked in such a doe-like manner that it must have been on purpose.

“Did you not hear the news? The Legal Affairs Bureau made the decision after today’s trial. Lord Lio, you will personally do the honors at Princess Alphina’s beheading.”

Words failed Lionett. He couldn’t even make a sound. This woman before him must have been the one to set things up. Why must he be the one to murder the love of his life? And yet, despite the agitation within his heart, the words that came out of Lionett’s mouth remained cold.

“Humph. Just what I wanted. I shall execute that vile villainess of a princess

and let all of the empire's citizens witness the authoritative might of the royal family."

"Oh, how amazing, Lord Lio! But...please, do not push yourself." The Saint extended her hand and held Lionett's, in much the same way that a serpent would ensnare its prey. "I'm always willing to lend you my shoulder in times of sorrow. Go ahead..."

At that moment, an unnatural passion suddenly welled up from within Lionett's chest. It was an inexplicable emotion that he'd never once possessed, urging him to embrace the Saint and take her to his bed at the back of his room. It insistently attempted to move his body.

No. That's the one thing I refuse! There's but a single woman in this world whom I will lie with, and I've already made my decision!

"I am grateful for your consideration," he told her. "But I'm sure you're exhausted tonight, much like I am. You should return to your room." He shrugged off her hand, and the Saint's lips twisted slightly.

"Squee hee hee, you and your useless resistance. Lio, you're sooo cute. ≡"

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing at all." With those final words and a graceful curtsy, the Saint left the room.

Lionett walked to the sink and scrubbed at the hand she'd grabbed with water. No matter how much he washed it, it still felt dirty. It was as if her flattery and filth remained attached to his hand. He didn't stop washing his hands until his skin became bright red.

If Alphina had been the one to hold my hand, I wouldn't have washed it.

However, there was no way that Lionett would ever hold her hand once more. Nor was there a future in which she would hold his.

It's never going to happen again. Oh, my Alph...

Chapter Two

The execution site in which Princess Alphina had lost her life many times before was outside of the Lione Empire, near a magical ore mine. This marked the hundredth time she'd experienced this day, and it was as sunny as ever. She had once hated this cloudless azure sky. But today, she felt like it was a blessing for her new beginning. It was a good day to die.

There had been sudden squalls on the seventh and thirty-eighth loops, forcing everyone but the prince, the executioner, and some of the civil officials to leave. Those had been lonely deaths. She hadn't been able to witness the Saint's cheesy acting, and it hadn't felt like she had died in a worthwhile way. But it seemed that there was no need to worry about that today.

"We shall now proceed with the execution!" The executioner's deep voice rang out before the nobles who had gathered to spectate the show.

Alphina, her hands still locked up in manacles, stepped onto the stage. In consideration of her status as the daughter of House Sylvana, she'd been allowed the barest minimum of makeup and a simple dress. Sandwiched between the muscular executioners, she nonetheless walked towards the guillotine with her head held high. The nobles watching secretly admired her courage.

Well, the one walking this time is just a doll.

On the roof of a church far away from the execution site, the real Alphina, along with Scarlet, watched as the doll bearing her appearance approached the guillotine. She'd used the spell Farsight to create a circular window from which she could see the state of the execution site. She could even zoom in at will. Not only could she hear everything, but she could also listen in on everyone's inner voices. Alphina had never imagined there would come a day when she would observe the death she'd experienced ninety-nine times as a spectator.

"A long life is a rewarding one, isn't it, Lady Alphina?" Scarlet, in his human body, said with a straight face.

“Does reincarnation count as living a long life?” Alphina laughed wryly.

“Princess Alphina, you will now be sentenced to execution by beheading.” Over at the execution site, the prince was in the middle of reading out his usual line.

“Yes,” the doll replied. There was no pun this time. The substitute didn’t have any intelligence, so it was incapable of complicated interactions. It could only say things that Alphina had ordered it to beforehand. It probably wouldn’t be able to handle any unexpected situations that might occur. Thus, there was a need for the prince to methodically carry out the execution as the law dictated.

“I’ll leave it to you, Scarlet.”

“Of course. I’m a very good archer.” With that, Scarlet nocked a silver arrow and aimed to the very front of the gathered spectators. Standing there was the Saint, protected by two guards as she watched over the execution.

The only time the cautious and sneaky Saint would show an opening would be the moment she’d been convinced of her own victory. In other words, the moment that the colossal blade of the guillotine would slam down upon Alphina’s neck—the moment that an evil and disagreeable smile would appear on the Saint’s face—Scarlet would shoot her.

“Oh, Princess Alphina, please forgive me for how powerless I am. I...wasn’t able to save you...” Debonaire lamented between sobs.

(Say buh-bye to your head! ♪ Your ugly head isn’t gonna be in my way anymore, silly little princess! ♪ Squee hee! ♪ Squee hee hee! ♪)

Alphina could hear the little piggy’s internal humming. Tears streamed down her face, and yet party streamers were fluttering inside of her heart. If Debonaire had chosen the path of an actress rather than a Saint, then she could’ve rewritten the history of the empire’s theaters.

“Lady Alphina,” Scarlet said in a cold voice. “Why don’t I take this chance to shoot that pig right through her mouth?”

“Well, that wouldn’t necessarily be a bad idea...”

Their aim wasn’t to take the Saint’s life. If they were to kill her here, then the

Saint would die at the pinnacle of her happiness, without experiencing a single iota of fear or shock. She would die as a servant of Xenos—as the Saint of the current generation. That would be meaningless. Unless she received punishment from the prince and the others, it wouldn't count as her making amends.

So their target was the circlet on her forehead. It was highly likely that ornament was being used as a medium for her Geis spell. So long as they could destroy it, the prince and everyone else would regain their sanity. They would be able to take back agency over their actions and follow the true feelings that Alphina had glimpsed up to this point.

“Bring Alphina to the guillotine.”

As the doll climbed the stairs step-by-step, Scarlet pulled the string taut. His crimson eyes grew even sharper. His confidence in his archery wasn't unfounded; his hands were completely stable. Without even a single errant twitch, he coldly and calmly aimed for the medium controlling everyone.

The doll's neck was locked in place in the guillotine. Alphina's father at the very front of the crowd swallowed nervously, and her mother closed her eyes tightly. Her younger brother very slightly hardened his expression. Kithling, the prince's closest advisor, remained by their side with his face turned towards the ground.

There was an uncharacteristically heartbroken expression on the prince's face as he raised his right hand high in the air and then brought it down. At the signal, the executioners released the rope attached to the blade. The angled blade gleamed as it closed in on the doll's nape.

“Now, Scarlet!”

“Understood!”

Scarlet's fingers let go of the taut bowstring. The enchanted silver arrow flew true to its archer's aim, accurately piercing through the emerald embedded in the circlet on the Saint's forehead.

“GUOH!”

The beginnings of a victorious smile had been on the Saint's face, but her

head bent backwards as she let out a vulgar scream. The back of her head slammed into the nose of the minister of justice behind her, and she fell down onto her back. The shards of what was once an emerald rained down around her, glimmering as they reflected the sunlight.

In that moment, as if they all took a collective gasp, expressions of realization appeared on the faces of the people staring at the guillotine.

“Wh-What am I—? What in the world am I doing?”

“It kind of feels like I’ve had a really long dream...?”

“No, this was all real!”

Alphina could hear them all describing multiple instances of displacement. They had regained their true selves now that they were free from the Saint’s Geis.

“We did it, Lady Alphina!” said Scarlett.

“Yeah...but we’re not done yet.”

This wasn’t enough. The Saint needed to get what was coming to her.

(Owwww, sheeeesh, that hurt! Where did that come from?! And just when it was starting to get good too! Anyway, this old man is in the way! Shove it, buster!!!)

A crude voice spouting vulgar words rang out through the execution site. The people looked about, searching for the culprit. Instead of hearing it from their ears, the mysterious voice had sounded directly in their heads. Eventually, they found the source of the racket. The Saint got to her feet after irritably pushing away the unconscious minister.

(Hmm? What’s with these bozos? Why’re these pervs staring at my face? Like, don’t even look at me if your face isn’t at least level ninety-nine? You’re gonna make me ugly by association! The only one who can stare at me is that sexy prince! ≡)

Without knowing that her inner voice was leaking out, the Saint smiled. It was the same expression she’d used to ensnare countless men. “Oh my. I apologize for my unseemly display, everyone. Oho ho ho.”

(Didn't I already tell you uggos not to look at me?! Why don't you guys take a gander at that head rolling about over there?! At the stupid expression of that woman who tried to get between me and my engagement with Lord Lio!!!)

And precisely why was such a situation happening? The secret to the trick was Alphina's magic. Scarlet's arrow had been blessed beforehand with the Amplification and Communication spells, which allowed the Saint's inner voice (previously only audible to Alphina) to be projected to everyone present. The only person who remained unaware was the Saint herself.

As the nobles surrounding the Saint raised their voices, Prince Lionett stood alone, his eyes focused on a single point. Before his gaze was his former fiancée, who had lost everything from her neck down.

"Al...phina..."

(Al...phina...)

Both his actual voice and his inner one had completely synchronized. Alphina had encountered many people over the past few weeks, but this was the first time that anything like this had happened. Everyone hid their true feelings inside, and what they put into words was always the opposite of what they thought. And yet, the prince...

"Alphina. Alphina, ohh...my Alph... I... I... Just what have I...?"

(No, no, no, no, no! Alph, Alph, Alph, Alph, Alph, open your eyes, Alph! Please!)

Lionett ran towards the corpse of his former fiancée and, uncaring of how his clothes became sullied with her blood, embraced the severed head. He repeatedly rubbed his cheek against it, ignorant of how it was a doll. His porcelain cheeks were wet with both the doll's blood and the fat streams of tears rolling down his face.

"That's the first time I've ever seen the Golden Sword like this. I thought he was supposed to be cold and unfeeling," Scarlet said. Even he seemed surprised.

"Your Highness..."

Alphina bewilderedly stared at the hero who was said to be the pride and joy

of the empire. She never imagined that she had been loved this much. She'd thought that their engagement had been decided by politics, and he'd simply gone along with it as the crown prince. Lionett had always been blunt and distant. It was rare for the two of them to even meet in private. Even when Alphina gained her powers and heard his inner voice, she hadn't fully believed it. And yet...

The hero whose military feats and beautiful visage alike had been praised by the world's greatest powers had completely lost his composure, all because of a single woman. Whoever could have imagined that? And Prince Lionett was not the only one in the depths of despair.

“AAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!”

A cry—no, a scream—that sounded like someone's death throes rang out from the corner of the execution site. Kithling Ashley fell to his knees and raised his head to the sky. “Princess Alphina! Oh, Alphina! Why wasn't I able to prevent this?!”

(A mistake! Mistake, mistake, mistake! Oh, I'm such an idiot! A fool! Kithling, you giant nincompoop!!!!!!!!!!)

He roughly ran his hands through his blue hair. Even when he knocked his glasses off his face, he didn't bother to pick them up. Fat droplets of tears rained down onto the lenses while he blamed himself with both his inner and actual voices.

“Some advisor to the prince you are! How can you call yourself that when you can't even offer advice to His Highness at a time like this?! You act like you're the smartest person around, and yet you still couldn't avoid this blunder! You deserve the cruelest of punishments!”

(I want to die, I want to die, I want to die! I don't want to live anymore. If my only choice is to live in disgrace in a world without Alphina, then I'll go to where she—)

Upon seeing Kithling remove the knife he carried around for self-defense from his belt, Alphina hurriedly ordered, “Scarlet! Aim for that knife!”

“Understood!” Scarlet said as he once again let loose an arrow.

The arrow sliced through the panicked mob that the execution site had descended into and hit the handle of the knife Kithling was holding, knocking it out of his hand.

There's no need for you to die as well, Kithling. Though it was with her mental voice, Alphina addressed her former classmate. *You still have to support His Highness, don't you? Stop fussing over me. I'm dead. Look to the future!*

Kithling was still sitting down, unmoving and in a state of shock. But around him, the panic continued.

“Stop, Carl! Stop this instant!”

Alphina's father's voice sounded out. When she turned to look in that direction, she saw her brother, Carl, calmly and without changing his expression, begin chanting the incantation for the Thundershock spell.

(I'll kill her. Kill the Saint. The one who killed my sister.)

Alphina shivered as she felt the powerful murderous intent emanating from Carl's detached inner voice and the accumulating magic. It was impressive that he could deduce the Saint was behind everything while surrounded by all the confusion. He really was a genius. But if he unleashed Thundershock in a space as crowded as this, then it would be a disaster.

If Alphina only focused on her personal feelings, then her little brother was way too cute. He was so angry at his sister's death that he was going to cast super high-tier magic to avenge it. But considering the situation, Alphina's logical side certainly won out; there was no need to commit mass murder because of that Saint.

“Scarlet, stop Carl this time!”

“No, it seems that there's no need for that.”

Alphina's father had taken out a handkerchief and placed it over Carl's mouth. Even if he was a magical prodigy, his physical endurance was leagues below that of an adult. Carl had no choice but to stop his incantation.

(Big sister. Al...phina. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I wasn't a cute younger brother. If I'd known this would happen...I would've asked you to...play with me more.)

Carl stared down at the ground with his cherubic face and fell silent. As everyone dealt with their own separate grief, the only person who couldn't understand the panic—the piggy whose airheaded ignorance bordered on bliss—was lightly dancing.

(Squee hee hee, squee hee! ♪ Squee hee hee! ♪ Squee! ♪ Assphina—death confirmed! Debonbon is the winner! Squee hee hee! ≡)

It felt as if Alphina could smell straw from the pigsty through the Farsight window. Completely oblivious to how everyone around could hear her thoughts, the Saint quietly... Well, no, there was a slight skip to her step, so describing it as “buoyant” would probably be more accurate. In any case, she buoyantly approached the prince.

“You have my deepest sympathies, Your Highness. Please take as long as you need now to let out your sorrow. I’m always willing to lend you my shoulder. Now, go ahead...”

(Heh heh heh. Now bury that beautiful face of yours into my bosom and fall even more in love with me. Mweh heh heh!)

The evil cackle, along with her interesting bird-like laugh, were hammered again and again into the brains of the spectators at the execution site. The nobles who had been raising a fuss fell silent one by one, turning their gazes to the Saint.

“Saint...Debonaire...” Prince Lionett, still clutching Alphina’s head, slowly raised his tearstained face. His eyes were as intense as a lightning bolt, exactly as the bards described, and he glared daggers at the Saint. “Just what in the world did you do to us, you dastard? Has this string of injustices been your doing?”

At that question, the only words that came out of the Saint’s mouth were, “S-Squee hee?” She had completely let her pig side out. Her body remained frozen in the middle of spreading her arms out to welcome the prince into her chest, her face still looking like she was seconds away from drooling.

“Guards! Arrest the Saint on suspicions that she bore excessive malice towards my fiancée, Alphina!”

“Say wha—?! Wai—! Wh-Wh-Wh-Why me?!” In a panic, the Saint rubbed at her forehead. The emerald circlet that she always wore was gone. It had been destroyed earlier by Scarlet’s arrow. Finally aware of what had happened, the Saint’s face paled. Her entire body trembled, and sweat poured down her brow like a waterfall. “S-Seriously?! All the cats are outta the bag? My Geis was lifted? My plan to make Lio mine just went poof?!”

“Don’t you dare call me Lio, you insolent wretch! The only woman who could do that was Alphina!”

There was no longer any need to relay Debonaire’s thoughts to the people. Her inner voice was leaking out via her actual one. The two executioners who had escorted Alphina to the guillotine roughly held Debonaire down. Though they had indifferently carried out the execution, there was clear anger on their faces. It must’ve been because they’d been forced to perform a task they hadn’t meant to do.

(How dare you make us kill Princess Alphina!) The shouts of their inner voices reached Alphina through the Farsight.

And now, it was time for the final act. Alphina adjusted her magic so that her inner voice would be directly projected to the Saint and only the Saint.

(This is revenge for all ninety-nine times you killed me. Saint Debonaire, I hope you’ve learned your lesson.)

(Ew?! Wh-Who is that?! C-Could you be...Alphina’s ghost?!)

The Saint was so scared that she’d gone white-eyed. Alphina sighed. And here she had thought that her opponent was someone with brains. It seemed that she was good at leading others into traps, but she had no idea what to do when *she* herself was caught in one. She really was a good-for-nothing sow.

(I’m sure you know now, don’t you? No matter what underhanded tactics you use, you can never obtain someone’s heart.)

(Huh?! You’re just a ghost! Stop spouting platitudes! So long as I have my gorgeous looks and my magic, I can get any guy—)



(All right, all right. Then go and fish for guys for the rest of your life, you boy-crazy saint.)

It wasn't as if she had much longer to live anyway. Debonaire had used magic to control not only the emperor, but the imperial family and other nobles as well. There was no doubt that this time, it was the Saint who'd have to off-er her head. Amends had been made, so it was time for Alphina's journey to begin.

She turned off the Farsight spell and erased the pig from her field of vision. As she did so, she called out to her loyal boy. "Let's go, Scarlet."

"Lady Alphina, do you have any regrets?"

Without saying anything, Alphina closed her eyes and called out to her loved ones with her inner voice.

(Farewell, father and mother. Please forgive your daughter for her lack of filial piety. Thank you for everything you've done for me. Farewell, Carl, my brother. It's truly painful to have to say goodbye, but I hope you stay strong. I leave the future of House Sylvana to you. Farewell, Kithling. I wish we could've talked a bit more. Please continue to support His Highness, all right? Farewell, Lord Lionett...no, Lord Lio. I was a little happy to hear your true feelings. Don't fall for any weird women anymore. I hope you meet someone nice. And...farewell, Princess Alphina Shinn Sylvana. You did great all ninety-nine times. Today, you've died your hundredth death. It's time for you to start living your new life.)

Alphina opened her eyes once more, and with her actual voice, she resolutely declared, "Let's go. And...let's live."

On July 26, 845 Anno Xenos, a princess disappeared from the annals of history. However, it was also the beginning of a new incident so grand that it etched itself into the history of the Lione Empire...

Chapter Three

The Amazone Forest—so named after the forest goddess in the holy stories of the Theva—was a remote location that would take a day’s hard riding from the empire’s capital, even on the fastest horse. In the past, it was called the Holy Ground. Because the forest was between the Lione Empire and the Heavenrose Kingdom, it was deemed neutral ground that belonged to neither country. A variety of monsters set up home in the Amazone Forest, and there were dungeons of all shapes and sizes.

It was a quiet place. Aside from adventurers attempting to clear the dungeons, people rarely set foot in it. After the empire’s former court magician Yulinar Finn Sylvana retired, she departed from the grandeurs of court life and set up a house in the woods where she spent her final years.

People called Yulinar an oddball, but her granddaughter Alphina loved visiting this house to play. All over the place, there were rare animals and plants that you would never see anywhere else, and on nights of the full moon, when magic was at its peak, you could even see the fae manifested before your eyes. For a tomboy like Alphina, the forest was akin to a mountain of treasure.

The other noble daughters loved to gossip about goings-on both inside and outside of court—who’s the hottest of the military officials, or how the neighboring prince had yet another one-night stand with a foreign princess. Meanwhile, Alphina had spent her days sprinting through the mountains and making friends with the animals. It caused her father, Duke Sylvana, much grief.

“You managed to become Prince Lionett’s fiancée, so I do wish you could be a bit more ladylike. I just hope this doesn’t look like disloyalty to the empire...”

Alphina knew of her father’s laments, and she *did* feel bad, but she’d never changed her ways. Her father was his own person, and so was she. No matter if you were parent or child, you had the right to live your own life. That Alphina would turn the Saint’s conspiracy into the chance to escape from the chains of high society and live her own life might, in a way, have been considered an

inevitability.

Arle Phia Earnes—that was the new name that Alphina came up with for herself. She was Yulinar’s secret adopted daughter, and after Yulinar’s death, she’d transferred to the eastern countries to be a student there. She had recently returned home after years abroad and, obeying Yulinar’s will, would become the forest’s guardian and live there with her butler, Scarlet.

That was the scenario she created for herself. In order to hide her appearance, she cast Disrecognition Magic upon herself. Even if someone had looked at Alphina, they wouldn’t have recognized her and would instead register her as someone else. It was a fairly rare spell, even within the repertoire of the old magic. The formula and medium were fairly simple, and if she cast it after she woke up, it could last an entire day. So long as she didn’t drop the spell, no one should be able to see through her disguise.

“But it doesn’t hurt to be too careful.” Saying that, she cut off her hair, which had been so long it reached her waist. She tied up her now-shoulder-length hair into a ponytail. “Heh heh, I’ve always dreamed of having hair like this!”

Back when she was Alphina, her mother had never allowed her to cut her hair. She’d even forbid her from tying her hair up like this for formal gatherings! *Jeez, traditions really are unfair.*

“What do you think, Scarlet? Even if I run through the woods, twigs won’t get stuck in my hair. Isn’t that great?”

“Oh, you look fantastic, Lady Alphina.”

“Heeey. I’m not Alphina anymore, remember?”

The crimson-eyed cat lowered his tail in place of his head. “My apologies, Lady Arle Phia Earnes. I’m the most fortunate cat in the world to be able to continue serving you.”

“That’s right; I’m Arle now. I’m not a princess anymore. I’m Arle, guardian of the woods...right?” Arle smiled brightly at her loyal butler.

However, the world was an unfair one. If you cut away one tie, another one

would take its place. Alphina...no, Arle...would soon come to understand this lesson.

A house with a triangular roof, made from wood and stone, had been built in the middle of a verdant field. From the east, one could hear the babbling of the brook. From the west, one could hear the songs of the birds. If you breathed in through your nose, the sweet scent of the acia flowers, which bloomed even on the empire's flags, would fill your nostrils.

If you wanted to drink water, there was a well. If you wanted to eat nuts, there were trees. If you wanted to eat fish, there was a river. If you wanted to eat something sweet, you could take honey from the bees making their hives in hollow tree trunks.

This was the best place in the world!

"Ah, this is the ideal house! The ideal world!" After finishing her daily gymnastics, Arle yelled out at the top of her voice. She had been exercising and messing up her ponytail since morning.

With a wry smile, Scarlet, dressed up in his butler clothes, handed his mistress a towel. "Lady Arle, it's been three months since we started living here, but you say that every day."

"Well, I mean, every morning is like a dream!" The former princess flared her nostrils and clenched her fists. "I've always wanted to live life like this. I don't have to spend hours on makeup for a meeting that only takes a few minutes. Or get squeezed into a tight corset and go to dance lessons. Or learn all those complicated and troublesome rules of court etiquette!"

"But living as a princess would have been so much more convenient, not to mention you would've had money."

Arle shook her finger and clicked her tongue. "That's true. You can find anything you could ever want in the capital. There's delicious cheese pies and theater troupes that put on great plays. There's big bathtubs with shiny gems embedded in them and beautiful rose gardens that some noble invested hours of their life into maintaining. It's the capital of the Lione Empire—the world's

largest country. Of course you can find everything there. But..." The sun shone through the leaves, and Arle raised her head, squinting her eyes against the glare as she continued, "What this forest has is nothing! Nothing, nothing! ♪"

"Hmm...that's a bit too complicated for me to grasp."

Arle chuckled as her loyal servant blinked his crimson eyes.

"Anyway, it just means that I'm living every day to the fullest. Now then..." She stretched and then grabbed a large hoe that had been leaning against a nearby tree, as well as a bucket full of fertilizer. She'd cast Lightweight magic on the hoe, and it was surprisingly light, even for an amateur farmer's untrained muscles. She had also mixed the fertilizer herself, so the plants that she grew matured differently from the ones shipped throughout the empire. "It's about time to get started on my morning work! Let's take it easy today too!"

"I shall go to the river. It's nearly time for the sellmon fish to swim upstream. I hope I can catch a big one."

After seeing Scarlet off with his fishing supplies, Arle stepped into the vegetable garden they'd made behind the house. In the area that had already been planted grew a vibrant green vine. Today, she wanted to create a new garden patch to grow other types of vegetables.

"I wonder what I should plant next! ♪" As she swung the hoe while humming, Arle suddenly felt that something was strange.



“Isn’t it awfully quiet today...?” She couldn’t hear any of the usual sounds of the forest.

The sound that was missing was the growling of the Flame Dragon. The beast resided in Mt. Flame Dragon, some ten kilometers away. Every morning, when the Flame Dragon woke up, it would make a rumbling sound so loud that it sent tremors through the trees and even the ground itself. And yet, Arle hadn’t heard it when she woke up that morning.

Perhaps it caught a cold? But that theory made her tilt her head to the side. Would a dragon whose massive body was protected by its crimson scales and who was capable of breathing burning hot flames get so sick that it would lie in bed all day?

If so, that would present an unprecedented opportunity for any adventurer who wanted to gain the glory of being a dragonslayer. Currently, the only person who bore that title was the prince of the neighboring country Heavenrose.

Arle’s former fiancé, Prince Lionett Lione, had also wanted the dragonslayer title. She had often witnessed the prince’s servants desperately stopping him as he attempted to trek to Mt. Flame Dragon. Their trepidation had been understandable, considering his status as the crown prince and heir to the throne.

If something had gone wrong and Lionett had died, then the empire’s future would’ve been in tatters. No matter how prodigious Lionett was with a sword, there was no way the country could have afforded that risk. The prince had understood this as well, and so had never forcibly departed for an adventure.

Lionett was a symbolic hero for the empire. That his rival had gone and accomplished something before he could must’ve been the most humiliating thing in the world. Once, Lionett had privately said to Alphina, “When I die, I don’t want it to be in the palace. I want to fall in battle against that dragon.”

“That sounds great! I want to see the dragon too, so may I come with you when you go?” was what Alphina had wanted to say. But she hid her true thoughts and, since she’d technically been his fiancée, tried to stop him instead. “You shouldn’t say things like that, Lord Lio!”

“Humph. I’m not even allowed to say it?”

“Of course not! Can you imagine how much His Imperial Majesty would grieve? It’s only been a few years since Empress Nadia passed away.”

“So you’re only stopping me because His Imperial Majesty would be sad...?”
Lionett remarked with a lonely smile.

“Your Highness?”

“Humph. Nothing.” After he shook his head, the prince stared at Alphina’s bright red hair. “I hear that the dragon’s scales are a glorious crimson, reminiscent of burning flames.”

“I see. So?”

“But,” the prince said after a pause, “I’m sure your hair is more...” Without finishing his statement, he had fallen silent and looked away.

At the time, Alphina hadn’t been able to understand his words. She’d never imagined that the distant Lord Cold Heart had actually been head over heels for her. But even with that knowledge, what did it matter now?

I don’t hate the prince. As a matter of fact, I think he’s an amazing person, but...I really don’t believe I’m suited to be the next empress. I’d suffocate if I had to spend the rest of my life inside that birdcage of a palace. The prince is so handsome; I’m sure that he’ll eventually meet a woman much better than myself.

“All...right!” She’d completely finished plowing the area that she had planned out. If Arle dared say so herself, she was exceptionally efficient, even though she’d only picked up farming about three months ago. The power of magic was amazing.

The next thing she had to do was spread fertilizer. But just as she placed her hand on the bucket, she suddenly heard it—a sound that hadn’t graced her ears since she’d left the empire’s capital: the sound of someone’s inner voice.

(Alphina...at the very least...allow me to put this by your grave...)

Arle was so surprised that her hand stopped. Her eyes widened as she froze in place. She’d heard the voice from the direction of the river.

“Lady Arleeeeeee!” What she’d heard just now was Scarlet calling for her. But the inner voice hadn’t been his. When Scarlet appeared, he was carrying a man on his back. “I’ve fished up something ginormous! We have to help him immediately!”

The man was covered from head to toe in terrible wounds. His scorched armor had broken off here and there, no longer able to carry out its duties. On top of that, he was completely drenched. His beautiful golden hair had once looked like a lion’s mane, but now it was soaked, with droplets of water dripping from the strands.

There was no mistaking who it was, even though he’d been reduced to this state—it was the empire’s hero, the Golden Sword.

“Lord Lio?! N-No way!”

When Arle ran over towards him, she saw it: clutched within his burned and ash-covered hand, there was the bright red scale of a dragon.

Though Arle had been flabbergasted at the sight of the battered prince, she quickly returned to her senses. “Scarlet, hurry and carry the prince inside the house! We have to dress his wounds as soon as we can!”

“Understood.”

With the prince still on his slender back, Scarlet carried him to the bed on the second floor. Arle got some more cold water from the well around back, and from the box of medicinal herbs her grandmother had used, she took out burn salve and maidenhair fish scales to serve as mediums for healing magic. After she got her supplies, she went to the second floor. Once she got there, she used everything to perform emergency first aid.

“Scarlet, if I remember correctly, my grandmother had brewed a voice changing potion, right?”

“Yes. There should still be some left.”

“Bring it here. I’ll drink some before the prince wakes up.”

“Huh? You’re going to drink *that*?”

Arle chugged the viscous green liquid that came from a small porcelain bottle. *Urk, it's so bitter.*

But she had to drink it. Even if the Disrecognition spell was effective, the prince had been her classmate since their school years. She wanted to be as prepared as possible. Afterwards, she spent half the day watching over the prince, trading off with Scarlet.

Around when the sun had started to disappear past the horizon, Lionett's eyelashes—so long it was hard to believe they belonged to a man—twitched, and he sat upright. "U-Ugh..."

"Your Highness, you shouldn't move just yet," Arle said to him from her place in the bedside chair. The bitter potion had done its job, making her voice deeper than normal.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Arle Phia Earnes, the owner of this house. My servant found you as you drifted down the river, and we patched you up here, Your Highness."

"I see..." The prince's face was tight with pain as he looked around the room restlessly. "Where is the Flame Dragon's scale?"

"Your Highness, you really shouldn't move."

"I unmistakably recall tearing the scale off of that ferocious creature. Where is it?"

Wordlessly, Arle took the scale out from her pocket. She'd wrapped it up in a handkerchief.

Upon seeing it, the prince's face slackened with joy. "Oh, good. I didn't drop it... I'm so glad."

This was the second time that Arle had ever seen such a natural smile on his normally serious face. "Did you really slay the dragon?" she asked.

"I'm not sure if I could say I slew it." As if he was fighting back pain, the prince pressed down on his wounded right arm. "It was essentially a tie. Just as I stuck my sword through its throat, its tail slammed me right down a cliff."

“Why did you do such a thing? You’re the heir to the great empire and the next emperor.”

At that, the prince closed his mouth, and for a while, silence reigned in the room. Even covered in burns, his profile was beautiful. Princesses and noble daughters from within the empire—nay, from all of the great powers—had been captivated by his porcelain face. And yet, there was a shadow of great sadness over his features.

“You said your name is Arle, correct?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Considering you saved my life, I apologize for my rudeness. However, I also have matters I do not wish for others to pry into. I hope you will not hold this against me.”

“I...apologize as well. It was terribly rude.” Arle lowered her head. As she did so, Lionett’s inner voice reached her.

(Even if I present this scale to her grave, that’s no way to make amends for my crimes or how foolish I’ve been. But I know of no other way to cure the emptiness in my heart. Alphina, if you were alive, you would surely laugh at me... No, I want you to laugh at me! I wish you would appear before me once more and...laugh at me...like you did back then...)

“AAAAHHH! AAAHHHH, AAAHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!! AAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Without thinking, Arle started to yell, and the prince stared at her with a surprised look.

“What’s the matter? Where’d that come from?”

“N-No, it’s nothing! I apologize for my outburst!” she hurriedly said, but she couldn’t stop screaming on the inside. *DON’T MAKE SUCH A PASSIONATE CONFESSION IN FRONT OF THE PERSON YOU’RE CONFESSING TOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

In both her past and current lives, Arle had been pretty ignorant about matters of love. But even for someone like her, it was embarrassing. Like, jeez, her cheeks felt like they were on fire! Even the breath of the Flame Dragon

would've been preferable to the heat on her face.

"A-Anyway, it's way too reckless to try and slay the Flame Dragon all by yourself. Did no one try to stop you?"

"If I had said something, then I'm sure someone would have tried. I slipped out of the castle in the middle of the night."

"Your Highness, you have a responsibility to all of the empire's citizens, don't you?" Arle exclaimed. "I understand wanting to go and have an adventure, but you shouldn't do things that could easily cost you your life!"

She'd spoken those words with the understanding that they were probably a bit too impudent, and that even if she *had* saved his life, the prince would likely get mad at her. Perhaps part of why she'd said it was because she wanted to hide the embarrassment she still felt. But the prince didn't seem bothered and simply stared at Arle's face as if scrutinizing her.

"You're the second person to scold me like that."

After remaining silent for a bit, Arle said, "I see." She could hear his inner voice again.

(She sort of looks like her. Her hair and her voice are completely different, but...there really is a resemblance...)

Arle knew there was no way that he could see through the ancient Disrecognition magic, but even so, her heart skipped a beat. The prince continued his thoughts.

(No, stop that. Lionett Lione, you're clinging onto the past. What you've lost was simply too great, and so...that's probably why you're finding similarities...)

It seemed he'd convinced himself that he was just seeing things.

"A-Anyway," Arle said as she cleared her throat, "what's important is that you're still alive! Please rest until you heal up."

"I wonder if I'll be able to do that. Considering my country's situation, I might not have the luxury of time."

"Situation?" Arle asked, tilting her head.

Through Scarlet, she did routine checkups on the state of the empire. But it was difficult to say that she was able to get the most recent news. Perhaps something was happening that she didn't know about.

"I'm sure you've heard about it as well. About three months ago, we discovered that a woman claiming to be the Saint had been dictating the politics of the empire."

"Yes, of course... But hasn't the Saint already been arrested and sentenced to death by the emperor? I thought all that's left for her is rotting in some jail cell while waiting for her execution?"

"That's correct. Or I should say, that's what was supposed to happen." The prince gritted his teeth irritably and spat out, "But Saint Debonaire... That wretched woman escaped."

"What?!"

"She escaped from the dungeon and fled to our neighbor—no, our enemy, Heavenrose!"

The sow who had ensnared and killed Alphina ninety-nine times—Saint Debonaire—had escaped from the dungeons. Not only that, but the place she'd fled to was the kingdom of Heavenrose, which had been in a stalemate with the empire. The only thing that stood between these great powers was this forest. The shock of the news was so great that, for a while, Arle had no idea what to say.

"Your Highness, could you give me a more detailed explanation of the situation?"

"It's my country's shame, but there is no way I could refuse such a request from someone who saved my life."

With a pained expression, the prince started to explain. Saint Debonaire had been chained up in the dungeon, waiting for her execution, but she had used her wiles and silver tongue to trick the guard in charge of giving her food. She'd convinced him to bring her some konpei fruit, which was a sweet snack popular with children in the empire. But it also served a second purpose: a medium for

charm magic. The guard, ignorant of that fact, had become a servant of the pitiful Saint.

“That woman is terribly shrewd,” the prince said, and he clenched his fist tightly where it rested on the bed. “Once the Saint escaped, she used the church to flee to Heavenrose and got in touch with the royal family there. Once she arrived, she told Prince Avenlock that Emperor Taiga had gone insane.”

“The Emperor had...gone insane?”

“She told him that His Imperial Majesty had believed the rumors about Princess Alphina having secret communications with Prince Aven,” Lionett continued. “And that, despite the lack of proof, he had executed her. Because of that, she claimed, the furious citizens have started to riot, and the entire country has become unstable.”

“Wow...” Arle breathed.

All of those acts were things that the Saint had forced people to do through her Geis spell. It was as if she’d set fire to something herself and then pinned the crime on someone else by yelling, “This is the arsonist right here!” Not only that, but the so-called “arsonist” in this case was His Imperial Majesty. She was truly an outrageously audacious woman. Even a pig covered in mud would’ve had more shame than her.

“That wretched Saint Debonaire... It’s infuriating, but she isn’t wrong. The citizens are indeed up in arms about Alphina’s execution. They’re disappointed that the royal family was tricked by the Saint, and it’s not a complete lie that the country’s situation has become unstable.”

“Wait, really?!” Arle was so surprised that she temporarily forgot to maintain her “Arle” persona as she asked him the question.

“Alphina was popular with the people. Considering they’d expected her to be the next empress, I cannot blame them.”

“Um... I don’t think she was *that* popular. She was rude, and carefree, and a tomboy, and not even that pretty...”

“Arle Phia Earnes.” The prince glared frostily at her. “You are my savior. But even so, I cannot overlook you insulting my Alphina.”

“M-My apologies!” Arle said. *“My Alphina”? Jeez, stop that! I’ll have you know you’re right in front of “your” Alphina!* she thought. “A-Anyway, I understand the situation now. If the country is unstable, then it’s the perfect opportunity to attack the empire. I’m sure that’s what Prince Avenlock would think as well.”

“Oh? Arle, you’re acquainted with Lord Blackrose?”

“Ah...no...” *Oops!* She had said that as if she was Alphina. “I’ve only heard about him through rumors. But they say that he’s a conniving individual.”

“That’s correct,” the prince said with a nod. “We were high school classmates. He transferred here for three years in order to try and de-escalate the military tensions between the Lione Empire and the Heavenrose Kingdom.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

I mean, I did attend the same school as you two.

“He was always making jokes and flirting with the female students, so some people called him the Debauched Prince. But I always felt an unspeakable darkness from within him.”

“Yes.”

Arle felt the same. Avenlock was a frivolous ladies’ man who had talked to every female student he’d seen. But sometimes, he’d carried with him a loneliness so deep that no one was able to approach him. There were rumors that the Heavenrose royal family was filled with conspiracies and plots over who would be the next ruler of the country. Avenlock must have gone through unimaginable difficulties.

“Speaking of Prince Avenlock, I heard that when the Saint informed him of Alphina’s execution, he threw his beloved sword to the ground and shouted at the people there with the ferocity of...well, a dragon,” said Lionett.

“He shouted?” It was impossible to visualize. Avenlock had always been easygoing, with his lips perpetually curled into a small grin. That pompous man who had acted so slick with the girls...shouting?

“Why in the world was he so angry?”

“Who knows,” the prince snorted. “Perhaps he also had affections for

Alphina.”

It took a minute for the words to sink into Arle’s brain, and once they did, she shook her head. “No, no, nope. That ain’t it. That definitely ain’t it!!!”

She had returned to her Alphina personality once more. Without even noticing the prince’s befuddled expression, she turned to the wall and pressed her forehead against it, muttering to herself.

“Uh, no way, right? Like, that definitely can’t be it. I mean, Prince Aven and I spent all of our school years arguing with each other. He never even called me by my name.”

“Prince Lionett.” Scarlet coughed as if clearing his throat. “I’m terribly sorry for my rudeness, but my mistress seems exhausted. May we be excused?”

“Yes, of course. I apologize for dragging you into my conversation.”

With Scarlet by her side, Arle left the room.

The two of them descended to the dining room on the first floor.

“Here you go, Lady Arle,” Scarlet said, handing her some cold water.

“Thanks...” She chugged it down and then let out a heavy sigh. “My mind feels all mushy. Like it’s soaked up way too much information.”

“Prince Avenlock philanders with princesses and noble daughters from allll around the world, and yet you’re the one he’s in love with? You’re amazing, Lady Arle!”

“And like I said, that’s definitely not true!”

Her loyal servant’s red eyes shone with excitement, but Arle stared back at them sullenly as she shook her head.

“Can you give me a more detailed rundown on your relationship with Prince Avenlock? I would love to hear about it!”

“There’s really nothing to say. All we did was fight...” But even as she said so, Arle allowed her memories to drift to her school days.

This had happened in the early summer two years ago, when Alphina was eighteen years old. At the time, she was in her third year of high school, and there had been a point when, for only half a year, she was the president of the student council. Up until this point, she'd been a rule breaker rather than a rule enforcer. But considering that she was the prince's fiancée, she hadn't been able to fully reject the role pushed upon her.

As the president of the student council, the biggest troublemaker Alphina had to deal with was the seventh prince of the neighboring Heavenrose Kingdom, Avenlock Heavenrose. One day, she called him into the student council room, and the two of them became embroiled in an argument.

"Prince Avenlock, I hear that you've yet again picked some of our school's prized flowers?"

"Did I? I've no memory of that."

Even if he was seventh in line for the throne, he was still a prince. And not only that, but he was the prince of a country with which the empire had military tensions. Alphina tried to keep the conversation civil, but Avenlock kept telling jokes and didn't take her seriously.

"This morning, one of my very few friends, Lady Flora, came crying to me. She said that you were toying with her. Is that true?"

"Toying with her'? Well, that's simply slander! All I did was find out that she's all looks with absolutely nothing on the inside, so I broke up with her after one night."

"That's what we normal people consider 'toying with'!" Without meaning to, Alphina raised her voice.

Avenlock shrugged his shoulders. "And that's what we call a difference of opinion. Even if it was for a single night, shouldn't she be happy that she was able to spend time with me?"

"Just where do you get that confidence?"

"My face, mostly," Lord Blackrose said cheerily, as if it was no big deal.

It was true that he had a handsome face. His dark skin, voluminous black hair,

and somewhat dubious sharp eyes all had an air of romantic charm that seemed somehow absent from the men within the empire. Alphina couldn't deny that there was an allure to him that was different from what Prince Lionett had. Nor could one say that the women who blithely followed him to bed after being tricked by his appearance and mannerisms were completely blameless, but...

"Just so you know, I didn't go out with Lady Aurora because I was messing around."

"Her name's Flora."

"Even if it was only for a night, I was serious. I was sincerely dreaming of a future with Carola. I don't think that I should be getting blamed for waking up after a single night."

"Like I said earlier, her name's Flora."

He was totally messing around with her...! He's an enemy to women everywhere! If he hadn't been the prince of another country, then Alphina would have given him a punch or two.

"It's called a dream because you'll eventually wake up from it, Millephina."

"What a delicious-sounding name! I certainly enjoy mille-feuilles. Except that my name is Alphina."

"Love and affection are transient things," Avenlock said with a lonely smile. "No matter how strong your flames of passion burn, they disappear into ash as soon as you wake from them. That's why I think that single night was a valuable experience. You agree with me, don't you?"

This was it—the solitude residing in between his frivolous and insincere words. This contrast was what made him so popular among the girls at the school.

"Unfortunately, I've no interest in love," Alphina said coolly.

"And yet you've bagged yourself Lord Cold Heart, haven't you?" Avenlock quipped.

"What? Not exactly. It's an arranged marriage."

"Haven't you noticed? There are times when that glacial mask falls away from

that expressionless man, and he always regards you with the sweetest look on his face.”

“Huh?”

Is this guy for real? When I talked to Lord Lio yesterday, he just said, “Humph,” and then turned his face away.

She wanted to poke Avenlock’s face with a finger and say something like, “Excuuuuse me? Are the lights on in there?” But considering he was the prince of a neighboring country... Well, you get the idea by now.

“Speaking of which, I saw that man getting all flustered yesterday. It was when we started wearing our summer uniforms instead of our winter ones, so he must have been distracted by how you looked in a blouse. You’re a wily woman, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me? Are the lights on in there?” *Oops, I really went and did it! I poked at Prince Avenlock—foreign royalty—and ground my finger into his cheek. Eheh.*

Prince Avenlock didn’t look like he’d been hurt and still had a flippant smile on his face. “Ooh, ouch. You’re even more of a tomboy than I’d heard! This is gonna be an international incident, Paulaflorina.”

“It’s *Alphina*! You got literally no part of my name right!” She’d finally gone so far as to yell at him. Upon seeing that, Avenlock’s face became serious.

“Well, anyway, in other words, you’re saying that you don’t view Lionett as an actual love interest. Is that right?”

“It’s not about me. The truth of the matter is that it’s a political marriage, right?” Trying to cover that fact up now would have been too troublesome. Just because no one actually said it out loud, that didn’t mean that it was something people were ignorant of. “I don’t know how it looks from your perspective. But I don’t think His Highness cares about me at all. He only sees me as the person he’s going to have a political marriage with.”

“Really?” Avenlock said after a pause.

“Yeah. And besides, I’m not suited to be the future crown pri—” Just as Alphina went to say that, she was interrupted.

“Don’t say it.” Avenlock suddenly transformed. His casual attitude from earlier had disappeared, and he glared at Alphina with a dangerous glint in his eyes. His expression was so serious that even Alphina, fearless as she was, startled. She finally understood the true meaning behind why people compared Avenlock to a dangerous black rose.

“Don’t say any more than that,” he continued. “I’m going to take it seriously. I’m going to *become* serious.”

“Wh...?” Alphina stammered after she registered the words. “About what?”

Subconsciously, she felt herself cowed by the pressure. The black rose’s thorn—no, his finger—extended to her chin, and after he grabbed it, he tilted her face upwards.

Huh?

For a moment, Alphina failed to grasp what had just happened. Upon seeing her surprised expression, Avenlock made a face like he’d come back to himself. His finger fell away from her chin.

“I was able to see the fearless princess’s scared expression, so I’ll take that as a win for today.” With those words, he returned to the flippant personality from earlier.

What was that just now? she wondered. “Oh, I see. It’s not as if I was scared or anything, though.”

Alphina’s voice also retained a more polite volume and tone. In truth, she *had* been a little spooked just now. But this was the one person she never wanted to show weakness to.

With a bored expression on his face, Avenlock rested his cheek in the palm of his hand. “Jeez, you’re not cute at all.”

“I know.”

“Let me rephrase that. You’re awful.”

“I knooooow.”

Prince Avenlock made a sound almost like a “Humph.” He said, “It’s been two years since I started school here, but you’re the only person who dares to talk

to me like that, Monkeyna.”

“Well, I *am* good at climbing trees. But my name is Alphina.”

“All the nobles I talk to just spend their time flattering me. Ah, well, I suppose it’s *because* they’re nobles that they do that.”

Alphina shrugged. “It’s not as if the nobles sucking up to you will magically make the empire and the kingdom friends, right? I understand that useless flattery is a waste of both my words and my breath.”

“That’s absolutely correct...but that’s also a really uncute thing to say.”

“Humph,” went both the princess and the foreign prince as they looked away from each other. Every time Alphina met with the rumored Lord Blackrose, their conversations were as unpleasant as this one had been.

“Lady Arle, thank you for telling me about your dealings with Prince Avenlock,” Scarlet said with a bow after she finished reminiscing. “But from what you told me just now, it appears you and Prince Avenlock are, as they call it, ‘vitriolic best buds.’ It sounds as if the two of you were simply messing with each other.”

“Uh, nope,” Arle said with a shake of her head. “No way. I think he really didn’t like me.”

“Truly? I simply cannot believe anyone could hate you without reason.” It seemed that Scarlet didn’t believe her. His loyalty made her happy, but he was overestimating her value.

“Once a month, he would throw a party at his manor and invite all of the girls in the school. But I never got an invitation.”

“Lady Arle, were you the only one who was not invited?”

“That’s right. I was super hated, wasn’t I?” she said with a shrug. “Well, thanks to that, I didn’t have to deal with anything too troublesome.”

She hated parties. Rather than wearing a sparkly dress and giving everyone polite smiles, she found that spreading fertilizer while dressed in muddy overalls was far more up her alley. That she was special by virtue of being the

only girl hated by the foreign prince hadn't inconvenienced her at all.

"My father used to get so upset. Like, 'Oh, Alphina, it's so pathetic how you couldn't even get an invitation!' Or, 'Could a woman like yourself ever hope to be the emperor's bride?' Things like that." *And he was right. I really wasn't fit to be the emperor's bride.*

Well, in any case, these were all happenings from a lifetime ago.

Two days after, although minor wounds still covered his face, Prince Lionett had recovered from his injuries and was ready to return to the capital. "Thank you for your hospitality, Arle Phia Earnes," he said. "May I really borrow this horse?"

"Yes. I'll send Scarlet to retrieve it one day, so please don't worry about it."

"Will you not come fetch it yourself?"

"I have to take care of my crops and gather herbs. I know it's hard to believe, but I'm quite busy here."

"Er..." the prince said, lowering his face slightly, "would it be...all right if I come to visit you again?"

"Huh?" Taken unawares, Arle stared at him.

The Golden Sword stared at the ground and played with his golden bangs with his fingers. "When I talk with you, it reminds me of my fiancée. Even looking at you reminds me of her somewhat."

"Ah ha ha, it must be a trick of the mind," Arle managed to say after a moment.

"I would like to ask this for my peace of mind, but do you have any blood ties to House Sylvana?"

Not even Arle could keep a straight face at this question. "O-Of course not. I'm just an orphan. Like, essentially a weed that Lady Yulinar plucked from the ground one day! Nothing more than your average shepherd's purse!"

"Even your manner of speech reminds me of my fiancée."

“Y-You must be joking! There’s simply no way that a duke’s daughter could say such odd things like that! O-Oho ho ho...”

In this moment, Arle had but a single regret: *I wish I had behaved a little better in my past life.*

She could hear the prince’s inner thoughts as he continued to stand before her. *(I know that I’m only having a hard time letting go. And yet...for just a little longer, I want to stay by Arle’s side, since she gives off an energy similar to Alphina’s. Oh, I’m such a shameless man!)*

Sh-Shameless...? Oh jeez...what should I do?

Seeing his mistress at a loss, Scarlet cleared his throat next to her. “Your Highness, it is about time for you to leave if you wish to reach the capital by sunset.”

“Right... Well then.” The prince hid away his desire to linger for a while longer and was about to leap onto the horse’s back. But at that moment, the space—the very air—he was about to head off towards twisted.

“Lady Arle, what is this?!” Scarlet yelled nervously.

It was the beginning signs of a Teleportation spell, one of the old magics lost to the distant past. It was impossible to accomplish without a grand ritual and a sorcerer with a large wealth of magical energy. Not only that, but only one or two people at a time could use Teleportation. Because of those severe restrictions, people had eventually stopped using the spell altogether, and it became forgotten.

Arle knew of Teleportation because the grimoires that Yulinar had left behind contained writings about it. That was one of the spells Arle had hoped to eventually try out.

“Wh-What is this?!” the prince yelled, wide-eyed, as he attempted to calm down the panicked horse. A black hole appeared from the twisted space, and a tall man materialized within.

It was immediately apparent that the man was of high standing, due to the expensive clothes he was dressed in. Moreover, he was someone very familiar to Alphina. His black hair was like the darkest of nights, and his tanned skin was

so different from that of the men in the Lione Empire. Though there was a wild look in his eye, his face had ensnared the hearts of all the empire's young women. That was right—it was none other than the prince of the neighboring Heavenrose Kingdom who stepped through the hole and landed in the forest.

“It's been two years since we met, hasn't it, Lionett Lione? Not since graduation?” Prince Avenlock's voice was filled with anger as he glared at Prince Lionett. “I thought I'd come to see the foolish mug of the man who executed his own fiancée for a crime she didn't even commit. I felt your magic here, so I went out of my way to visit you.”

“What?” Prince Lionett said after a beat. Then, he placed his hand upon the sword in his belt. “We may have been classmates, but I cannot ignore that statement. Take it back, Avenlock.”

“Rather than grieving, you're holding a clandestine meeting with another woman in the woods? Lio, you really know how to disappoint a man. Should I gift you my 'Debauched Prince' title?”

“Aven, I told you to take it back!” Prince Lionett unsheathed his sword, and upon seeing that, Prince Avenlock did so as well.

“P-Please calm down, you two! You can't duel here!” Arle said.

But the two of them continued to glare at each other, Arle's voice falling on deaf ears. The tips of their blades were so close that they were practically touching. Scarlet hurriedly pulled on Arle's arm.

“Lady Arle, it's dangerous! Please step back!”

“You think I can do that?! A world war is about to start!”

She wasn't even exaggerating. The relationship between both countries was tense enough already. If both of the heirs decided to fight here and now, then no matter who won, a war would undoubtedly start. This was completely different from the time Alphina had poked at Avenlock's face.

Just why would Prince Avenlock do this, anyway?! Wanting to find out the reason why he was challenging Lionett to a duel, Arle focused her mental ears on his inner voice. As she did so, the inner voice—no, the inner song—rang out from the beautiful dark-skinned man. It was a song that surpassed her

imagination.

“For Love! Thus, I Murder! *Dear Alphie*”

Lyrics: Me | Composer: Me | Arrangement: Me!

♪ OOOOHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH MYYYYYYYYYYYYY

♪ LOOOOOOVELYYYYYYY ALPHIIIIIIINNAAAAAAAA

♪ WHOOOO KILLED YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUU?

[Spoken]: “The Prince! The Prince! Prince Lionett!”

[Spoken]: “Blond! Blond! He of golden hair!”

♪ LAH-LAH-LAH-LAH-LAH-LIOOOOOOONEEETT

♪ YOU KAH-KAH-KILLED HER—I’LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU!

♪ Chorus: Paayyy wiiiith yooourrr liiiiife!!!!!!!!!!!!

“Um...whaaaaaa...?” Arle found herself saying aloud. *Wait a second.*



Hey... I said wait a second! Excuse me... Um...who? Who's this...tone-deaf man? He can't hit any of the notes, and the lyrics make no sense? Where did that cool and nihilistic Lord Blackrose disappear to?

But the music continued.

♪ MY DEAR ALPHIE! ALPHIE! ALPHIE!

♪ MY DEAR ALPHIE! ALPHIE! ALPHIE!

♪ MY DEAR ALPHIE! ALPHIE! ALPHIE!

♪ ALPHIE! PHIIIIIEEEE! PHIE, PHIE, PHIEEEE! *(Jump 3x)*

Okay, like I said: Who? Who's this "Alphie"? Wait... Could it be me?!

Arle had no idea what to do. There was a distinctly violent atmosphere pervading the usually peaceful Amazone Forest. This Avenlock was a completely different person from the one she knew. He had been called Lord Blackrose, the one who had literally charmed the pants off of so many female students before tossing them away.

Alphina had lost count of how many times her friends had come crying to her about him. She'd also lost count of how many times she had summoned him to the student council room and warned him to stop messing around with the girls. And every time, the prince had said, "My love only lasts for a single night. Don't ever think that you can carry my affections all the way into the next day."

He'd always spouted that nonsense with such a smug expression. That was right. He had looked smug—so smug that you could practically see the letter "S" on his mug.

So what's with these inner thoughts...?

(Oh Alphie, you who served as my harbor during my stormy student years! You were the only person in the empire who didn't try to assassinate me in my sleep or get in my good graces through empty flattery. You were the only one who still acted your true self with me.)

Er, no, I didn't? All I did was issue you warnings because of your terrible behavior?

(I only realized how much our little games at school soothed my heart after I returned to the kingdom. I never knew how...happy they'd made me...)

I'm really sorry to have to say this, considering how sentimentally you're narrating this little monologue of yours, but...it kind of feels like you're years too late. Sorry.

♪ AAAAHHHH! MY DEAR ALPHIE! ALPHIE! ALPHIE!

♪ OH! MY DEAR ALPHIE! ALPHIE! ALPHIE!

♪ ALPHIE! PHIIIEEEE! PHIE, PHIE, PHIIIEEEE! *(Reverse somersault 3x)*

“STOP SINGIIIIING!!!!!!!!!! WHY ARE YOU PULLING OFF THREE SOMERSAULTS IN A ROOOOOW?! AND REVERSE ONES, AT THAT????????!!!!!!!!!! YOU'RE SO FREAKING ANNOYING!!!!!!!!!!” Before she even realized it, Arle was already yelling. “Please calm yourselves, you two! Your duel cannot be laughed off as nothing more than a private disagreement. There's a chance that it'll become a war between your countries. Do you understand that?!”

Prince Avenlock glanced at Arle. “What do you want, woman? This has nothing to do with you. Scram.”

His voice was as cold as his gaze. But his inner thoughts were as follows: *(Huh? That girl looks kind of like Alphie. Specifically her eyes and her nose. Maybe they're related? Yippee, I'll ask for her name later!)*

Annoying! He's the most annoying guy I've ever met!

“Do not forget who you're dealing with,” Prince Lionett said sharply. “Aven, she has nothing to do with this.”

(Has he noticed that Arle resembles Alphina? So he really did like Alphina? She was my fiancée, you promiscuous fool!)

“Humph, of course I know that, Lio. You seemed to be having a hard time finding an opening in my defenses, so I gave you the chance to strike.”

(Oho? I see how it is. So that's why you came to visit her, huh? You came looking for a woman who looks like Alphina, yeah? Jeez, you're hung up on her, Licentious Lio!)

Their inner voices were locked in a vicious argument, but from Arle's point of view, they were both on the same level. The two of them held up their weapons once more and slowly closed the distance between each other. The duel was still on.

"Ummm, excuse me, you two? Did you hear what I—?"

"Let's go, Lio!" Prince Avenlock yelled. "Do you think you can handle the power of my dragonslaying blade?!"

"You think that's impressive, Aven?" Prince Lionett bellowed back. "You're sorely mistaken if you think you're the only dragonslayer around!"

Sword clashed with katana, sending sparks flying into the air, all while Arle remained ignored in the background. "Um, er, hey. Listen to—"

"What? You mean you also slew a dragon?"

"It's so I can offer the red scale of the Flame Dragon before Alphina's grave!"

"Excuse me..."

"You've got no taste! The scale of the Ice Dragon I brought would much better suit Alphina's beautiful red hair!"

"No! If she decorated her chest with this crimson scale, then it would match her exquisite red hair! What a pretty picture it would make!"

"In your dreams, Lame-o-nett! And you call yourself her former fiancé? You don't understand the first thing about what made Alphina charming!"

"Stop casually using Alph's name like that, you rude flirt! You'll get her name all dirty!"

SNAP.

Later on, Scarlet would testify that in that moment, he'd witnessed a thick vein appear on Arle's forehead. Arle focused her mind and held her clasped hands forward. She imagined a smoldering fire gathering in the palms of her

hand. All she had to do was channel the burning anger in her chest, so it was simple.

“GIVE ME...A BREAK!!!!!!!!!!!!”

A huge fireball—a bright crimson collection of flames—flew towards the two princes’ feet. They managed to dodge it at the last second, but it gouged out a huge chunk of the earth, making it look as if a Gigantes giant had left behind a gargantuan footprint. Arle did not want to damage any part of her precious forest. But there was a limit to how much she and her shyness could stand.

“Wh-What’s with the strength of that fire?” Prince Avenlock groaned softly. “An advanced-tier spell? No, a super high-tier one?”

“It was simply the intermediate-level spell Fireball,” Arle pointed out.

“It looked less like a ball of fire and more like a fist created from an inferno.”

“Prince Avenlock, would you like a taste of my *real* fist?” she said. She was half-serious about the threat too.

But Prince Avenlock didn’t look scared. Instead, he stared at Arle with a heated look. “You, with the red hair. What’s your name?”

“I’m Arle Phia Earnes. I’m the guardian of this forest.”

“Arle, you say?” He stared at her even more intently. “Arle, are you related by blood to Princess Alphina?”

“No, no, no! I’ve never even met her!”

“I hear that her grandmother lived out her retirement in these woods, though?”

“Lady Yulinar was my teacher. She took me in after I was orphaned and raised me as her own.”

(There’s no mistaking it... I feel something similar to my dear Alphie from this redheaded woman...)

“Stop adding the word ‘dear’ before my name! It’s embarrassing!” Alphina dearly wanted to shout, but there was no way she could let them know about her ability to hear their inner voices. It was a magic as dangerous—or perhaps

even more so—than the Saint’s Geis. There would be uproar all around the world if people found out about it. Once that happened, she could say goodbye to her peaceful life.

Prince Avenlock let out a big sigh and then sheathed his sword. “For Arle’s sake, I’ll back down for now. But hear me, Lionett. What you did to Alphina was both despicable and unforgivable.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” Lionett growled after a pause. “I know.”

“If you know, then why are you still alive?” Prince Avenlock’s sharp glare seemed to pierce holes through Lionett. “Why don’t you chase after Alphina and just go die?! I don’t suppose you’ll end up anywhere in the paradise she’s at, though! What use is a man who can’t protect his own fiancée, anyway?!”

Prince Lionett lowered his head silently. Arle couldn’t even hear his inner voice. That was how sad he was.

“Er, Prince Avenlock? I don’t think you have to be *that* hard on him...”

“Arle, I shall request for you to shut up. This has nothing to do with you.”

Um, it super-duper does?! Like, to the point where if it has nothing to do with me, then pray tell, who in the world has something to do with it?! That was what she wanted to say, but right now, she was Arle and not Alphina. In any case, though, she had to try and calm Avenlock down.

“Um, all right. So, like, I hear that Princess Alphina was a real tomboy, so I kinda always thought that she wasn’t a fitting fiancée for the prince! Ah ha ha...”

After she said that, the two princes, at almost the same time, yelled with their much-too-loud voices: “Don’t insult my Alphina like that!!!!!!”

Woow. Whyyy are the two of you the best of friends now? But Arle couldn’t give up. She had to wag her tongue as much as she could if she wanted to stop the outbreak of a world war. “Prince Avenlock, you used a spell from the old magic earlier to Teleport here, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” When Prince Avenlock answered, it was only after a beat and in a distracted tone. It seemed like he couldn’t stop staring at Arle’s face.

“I know something about magic myself,” she continued, “but Teleportation is beyond me. Has research into Teleportation been afoot within the Heavenrose Kingdom?”

“It’s not something my country has been looking into. It’s a spell that Saint Debonaire, who fled to Heavenrose recently, taught us.”

I knew it, Arle thought. Out loud, she said, “The Saint was greatly involved in my...I mean, Princess Alphina’s false accusation. She used the old magic spell Geis to force His Imperial Majesty and His Highness to act against their true thoughts and emotions. *That’s* what led to Princess Alphina’s execution. In other words—”

“‘Emperor Taiga and Prince Lionett are innocent.’ Is that what you want to say?” Prince Avenlock scoffed. “I already knew of the Saint’s ugly personality, as well as the Geis. Some members of the Intellectual Bureau have suggested that we arrest the Saint and send her back to the empire.”

“Huh?” Alphina stared at Prince Avenlock’s face in shock. “Are you saying that you’ve seen through the Saint’s schemes? Then why—?”

“This is a fantastic opportunity for the war advocates within the kingdom,” the prince explained. “The Heavenrose Kingdom has long desired the southern port of the Lione Empire, which will gain us access to the Euge Sea. The Saint is nothing more than a convenient excuse to that end.”

“Isn’t that an invasion?!” Arle exclaimed. “That is simply unacceptable!”

Prince Avenlock shook his head furiously. “Don’t get your knickers in a knot, Arle Phia Earnes. That was simply the war advocates’ logic. I care little for the port.”

“Then why?”

“The Saint’s Geis is powerful, I admit. However, I cannot sympathize with Lionett just because of that. It’s obviously the idiot’s fault for falling for magic! You should have dispelled it with your willpower!”

Oh, wow. You’re going to spout that immoral idealism? You would tell a sick person that they’re in the wrong for catching a cold? I’d never want to live in your country!

“It’s as Avenlock says,” Lionett added. “I should’ve done something about the Saint’s wicked magic with my willpower...! I wasn’t strong enough...!”

“Uh, Your Highness, what are you talking about?!” *I don’t want to live in his country either... Why are men so obsessed with idealism? Like, as if you can do anything if you just believe in it? I expected this from Prince Lionett, but Prince Avenlock didn’t seem the type...* With that thought in mind, Arle focused on their inner voices.

(It’s not something you can excuse away as the result of being under a spell!) Avenlock growled in his heart. *(My beloved Alphie was killed! Just why do you think I spent all of our school years trying to suppress my love for her?!)*

Huh? Where’d that come from? Arle thought. She had no inkling of where his confession came from, since she’d spent those same years under the impression that Avenlock despised her. “Prince Avenlock, you’re asking the impossible. I mean, it was old magic. You can’t just fight back against Geis.”

“I refuse to listen,” he sniffed. “It would be one thing if he was an ordinary civilian. But for the prince of the empire to use Geis as his excuse... Speaking as someone in the same position, it’s absolutely unacceptable!”

But the prince’s inner voice was shouting something completely different. *(This is my revenge—my vengeance on Alphie’s behalf. I’ll massacre them all! After I use the Saint to accomplish my revenge on the empire, I’ll kill her too. I’ll save her for last and take my time to savor her screams. I’m going to exterminate every last person in this world who bullied my Alphie!)*

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Stop, like, seriously stop! What in the world are you thinking?!” Arle screamed. It was no longer the time to put on diplomatic airs. *A massacre?! Isn’t that worse than an invasion?! If you’re going to kill anyone, then just kill that sow of a Saint.*

“Hmm.” Prince Avenlock looked into his pocket as if he’d noticed something and then removed a glowing green stone from it. The light emanating from it seemed somewhat dim. “It appears I’m out of time.”

“Out of time?” Arle echoed.

“It’s time for my return gate to open. If I don’t pass through it and go home,

then I shall end up stuck here.”

“So in other words, the Saint can’t freely use Teleportation either?” Arle said. It would’ve been disastrous if she could. For example, she could Teleport entire armies to the empire or send assassins directly into the emperor’s bedroom. The empire would be taken over in a heartbeat.

The air behind Prince Avenlock warped, and a black hole appeared. It was the same phenomenon as when he had first showed up. He likely planned on walking through the hole and returning to Heavenrose.

“Lionett, we’ll continue our match another time,” Prince Avenlock said, but Lionett did not reply. He simply nodded in silence, and Prince Avenlock fixed him with a sharp look. “Even if the Saint was involved in that conspiracy, you were the one who carried out Alphina’s execution. I will definitely make you pay for that crime. And not just you. Everyone, including Emperor Taiga, had a hand in it. Everyone in this empire is a target of my revenge—my enemy! Carve that knowledge into your skull.”

His voice was so cold that it sent chills down Arle’s spine. And then, Prince Avenlock looked at her and said in a kind voice, “Arle, I don’t wish to hurt you. Fortunately, this forest you’re in is neutral ground. Once the war starts, make sure you don’t set a single foot outside of it. All right?”

(That’s a promise, Arley! A pinky promise with Lord Blackrose. ☆)

“That’s disgusting. Please stop that,” Arle said.

“Ha. What an interesting woman.”

(Aaahhhh, that prickly attitude really reminds me of Alpie! I’m definitely going to come and see her again! ☆) And with a small smirk, Prince Avenlock disappeared into the black hole in a sort of cool and stylish fashion...all the while internally waving his arm like how a dog might wag its tail.

What a waste of a handsome man.

“It seems that our army must also make preparations for war,” Prince Lionett said reluctantly.

“Please wait, Your Highness! You mustn’t start a war, not over a reason such

as this. You must reconsider!”

But the prince shook his head. “They’re the ones who would be starting the war, and sitting around like lambs at the slaughter is simply not an option. We must meet them in battle. I, too, must hurry back to my people.”

“I can’t believe it...”

“I apologize for getting you involved in this, Arle,” Prince Lionett said, his eyes kind and gentle. “As Avenlock said, I would like for you to remain in this forest.”

Arle opened her mouth to say something—anything—but no words came.

“If the war ends, then I shall come to meet you again... Farewell.” The prince leapt onto the horse’s back and rode off. Arle had no choice but to stare blankly after him and his blond hair flowing in the wind.

Now that Prince Avenlock had disappeared into a black hole and Prince Lionett had left on horseback, peace finally returned to the Amazone Forest. With the help of Scarlet and the forest animals, they covered up the hole in the ground that Arle’s giant fireball had created. She was only able to return home after that task was finished.

“Hmmmmm... HMMMMMMM...” Arle paced around the living room, wandering here and there and everywhere, as she groaned. After going through a hundred executions, she had been confident that nothing would be able to bother her anymore. And yet, life had its ways. “Hey, Scarlet.”

“Yes, Lady Arle?” Even in times like this, her young butler waited patiently like a loyal dog for his mistress’s words.

“The war that’s about to happen... Is it going to be my fault?”

“No. The one who’s at fault is ultimately the Saint. There had always been tension between the two countries, and she was the one who made it snap. Lady Arle, I don’t believe that you’re at fault for that. However...”

“However?”

Scarlet clenched his adorable little fist. “What’s firing up Lord Lionett and Lord Avenlock is their love for you, Lady Arle! It’s because you’re so charming that

the two hate each other and are in conflict. In some ways, I suppose you could say that your charm borders on criminal!”

“Who’s saying that, and can they please stop?!”

This was in no way a brag, but in the past life that she’d repeated ninety-nine times, she had virtually zero experience being popular with men. Arle had absolutely no immunity when it came to matters of romance. Every time she heard the princes’ passionate inner voices, she felt like her face would erupt into flames.

“Which dragon scale did you prefer—Prince Avenlock’s silver one or Prince Lionett’s red one? I think either of them would look amazing on you!”

“I liked neither of them!” Scarlet must have been happy that his mistress was so popular, because he had a bright smile on his face. But from Arle’s perspective, she didn’t feel excited or happy at all. “Oh jeez. Ohhh jeez. What should I do?!”

The deer, raccoons, and birds from the forest watched worriedly from the window. They must have seen the way that Arle paced from one end of the living room to the other. All of them were her precious friends. Every single animal and living thing in the Amazone Forest was practically her family. Even if the forest was considered neutral ground, they wouldn’t be able to fully escape the chaos of war once fighting broke out between Lione and Heavenrose. It would put their lives in danger as well.

“By the way, Lady Arle, you said you used Fireball earlier to stop the two princes fighting, yes?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Fireball is an intermediate-tier spell, but the intensity of your flames rivaled that of the super high-tier magic Hellflare. I believe it would be wise to consider your spells as being two tiers higher than what they actually are. Please be mindful of that in the future when you cast magic.”

“Now that you mention it, Prince Avenlock did seem surprised.” After being reincarnated ninety-nine times, Arle’s body housed an unbelievable amount of magic. That was why she could so deftly wield the old magic Telepathy. It was

possible—no, more than possible—that she was on the same level as the Saint and her control over light magic. In that case... “Then in that case, I have no choice but to go back.”

She had decided that she would never again get herself involved in the world’s affairs, that she would live her life completely separate from the intricacies of politics or high society. But under the present circumstances, there was only one option for Arle to choose.

“Scarlet!”

“Yes, Lady Arle.”

“We’re going to the Heavenrose Kingdom! It’s going to be a long visit, so pack with that in mind.”

“Are we going in the name of peace?” Scarlet queried.

“That’s right. Let’s go kick that Saint’s butt and make sure that she won’t be able to do any villainy ever again. I’m going to stop the war as the guardian of this forest!”

“Understood! I shall follow you to the ends of this earth!”

The former princess didn’t know it at the time, but this decision would incite further conflict down the line.

Chapter Four

To start with, just what even was a Saint? To put it in simple terms, a Saint was the servant of God Xenos. As for God Xenos, he was the one who stood above the other eleven gods in the Theva. “The Saint” was what people called the priestess believed to have been sent by Xenos in order to act on his behalf.

The Saint could hear Xenos’s oracles. As an example, an oracle may have warned the people, “There will be a drought this summer, so make sure you stock up on plenty of food.” Because the Saint would deliver these helpful messages, she was considered a VIP no matter what country she resided in. No one would dare treat her with anything other than the utmost respect.

Only one person could be considered a Saint every generation. Should the Saint perish, then it would take decades before the next appeared. The organization responsible for deciding if someone really was a Saint was the Church of Xenos. The Church of Xenos was the world’s largest and only religious organization. In the past, there had been a variety of different religions, but now the only one left was the Church of Xenos.

The church would certify a Saint like, “Yup, from today onward, this girl is the Saint! Treat her well!” And until the day she died, every country in the world really would treat her well—because she had the backing of the church.

For her escape from the empire, Saint Debonaire had utilized the church by requesting aid from the branch within the Lione Empire and then fleeing to the Heavenrose Kingdom. Her claim to the kingdom had been, “I’m innocent! It’s the empire that’s wrong!”

Arle, who had been killed by the Saint ninety-nine times, thought: *That sow prooooobably gave one of her usual cheesy performances, huh?*

According to Scarlet’s intel, the Saint was being closely guarded deep within the Heavenrose royal palace. They feared that she would be taken back by the empire, and therefore the only people who could interact with her were members of the royal family or the church.

For the time being, Arle's goal was to meet with the Saint. She would face off against her, beat her up, and find a way to bring her back to the empire. And this time, she would undoubtedly offer the Saint's head to the emperor and then make an appeal to the world that the empire's political situation was in order. The kingdom might reconsider their war if she did that. So then, how should she go about meeting with the Saint?

Perhaps she could simply petition Prince Avenlock, "Let me meet the Saint." But she didn't want to meet Lord Blackrose. She seriously didn't. Dealing with his singing and his jumping and his somersaulting would be way too annoying! Her plan would, outside of extenuating circumstances, make sure she avoided him as much as possible.

In that case, the only other way Arle could think of was through the church. Then, money would be the most important factor. There was a chance that she could get away with donating a lot of money and acting like she just wanted to catch a glimpse of the Saint. After all, this was the sort of church that would venerate that sow as a Saint; it was absolutely greedy for money. When Arle was a child, she'd often heard of scandals involving the church's financial situation.

So all in all, everything came down to how much money she spent. Arle had Scarlet sell several valuable potions and medicines that her grandmother Yulinar had left behind and exchanged the earnings for gold. She could easily brew more potions. On the flip side, if a war happened and it destroyed the forest, it would take years to recover from the damage.

When Arle made her donation, she also gave the church a fake story: Arle Phia Earnes was the third daughter of a family of dukes and duchesses in a Far Eastern country, making her a full-blooded noble. This had been Scarlet's idea.

"I mean, just think about it, Lady Arle. They'd find it suspicious if a forest guardian who was supposed to be living a humble life showed up with so many bricks of gold. If you said that you're a noble from a Far Eastern country, with no ties to either the empire or the kingdom, then they wouldn't be able to find holes in your story. We're not really lying to them either. You really were a princess."

Boo. After all this time, I have to pull out the nobility card? I have to be a princess again? Such had been Arle's thoughts on the matter, but in the end, she'd caved to Scarlet's insistence.

About a month after Prince Lionett and Prince Avenlock's face-off, Arle and Scarlet made their way to the capital city of the Heavenrose Kingdom, Rozen. It was located right at the heart of the country and functioned as a fortress. It was surrounded on all sides by tall walls and encompassed an area a third the size of the empire's capital city of Lione, while still housing the same number of citizens.

The two of them visited the Church of Xenos, situated in the southern end of Rozen. With three *thunks*, they placed three leather bags of gold onto the table. The once-disinterested church branch manager's face flushed red. He twisted his fat body this way and that, even acting like he was using the sleeves of his robes to wipe drool off of his face. "Oh, Princess Arle, you are a shining example of a devoted follower of Xenos!"

Pee-yew! I can smell the stink of corruption from here!

In any case, the church gave them permission to meet with the Saint—for now, at least. According to the branch manager, the church would later contact them to confirm their meeting time and had requested that Arle and Scarlet stay in the capital for a while. So Arle booked a room in the inn right next to the palace.

In the carriage ride from the church to the inn, she observed the capital from the window. It looked like an open-air market, with plenty of stores lined up next to each other. All of the customers on their shopping trips made for a lively atmosphere. "It looks like the kingdom's capital is more alive than the empire's."

"You're right, Lady Arle. This place lacks the empire's sense of organization, but in exchange, all the people here fill it with an air of vigor. There are lots of stores as well."

"The last time I came, it felt a bit quiet," Arle reminisced. "But now it kind of seems like all of the citizens have gotten a burst of energy."

Just once during her youth, Arle had visited this place with her father. That had been her first time visiting a foreign country, and ignoring her father's attempts to stop her, she'd run around the streets of Heavenrose. The citizens who stared at the young Alphina had all looked empty and tired.

"The empire is still the one with more power," she remembered her father saying. However, now the power balance between both countries was equal. Over a decade had passed since then, with lots of political changes. The seventh prince Avenlock, who used to be low on the line of succession, had slowly gathered more and more power, and was now referred to as a hero. As a result, the kingdom had been transformed into a country with as much power as the empire.

The very same Lord Blackrose who saved this country is in love with me? Arle still couldn't believe it. Just what was that song? That recital? Maybe she'd been dreaming...? *No, I don't want to think about that right now.*

"By the way, Scarlet," she said.

"Yes, Lady Arle?"

"About a month has passed since what happened in the forest, but it doesn't seem like war has broken out, huh?"

"No. It seems that both sides have been steadily gathering their forces at the border between the two countries, but there have been no open hostilities yet."

"Why is that?" Arle asked. "Prince Avenlock was so mad that it looked as if he wanted to start a war right then and there."

After thinking for a bit, Scarlet answered, "It's likely due to the terrorist incidents that've been occurring in the capital lately."

"Terrorist incidents?" she echoed.

"It seems that there have been explosions here and there around the palace," he explained. "I hear that the walls around Rozen have even been targeted. In an odd but fortuitous coincidence, there have been no deaths. However, it appears that the citizens are growing more fearful by the day."

“I see...” The streets outside the carriage window looked so peaceful. Arle could never have imagined that such dangerous incidents were occurring. “Not even Lord Blackrose is up for a war under these circumstances, I suppose.”

“Yes, the war will likely be postponed until the kingdom can arrest all the terrorists.”

That was very convenient for Arle, but just who was going around committing terrorist acts, and what were they after? Right when she started pondering that, the carriage, on the verge of turning into an alley in the shop district, suddenly stopped. Unable to fully make the turn, it had slammed into a stall. All of the fresh vegetables were tossed to the streets, their red and green juices squirting out onto the ground.

The citizens screamed as they ran, the sounds of their panic echoing in the alleyway. Meanwhile, the carriage shook so much from the impact that Arle slammed her head against the ceiling.

“Owww!!!!!!!” Get it together, coachman! Where do you think you’re going?! For all the money you scammed from me, you drive like a drunk! I could have done a better job! Give me my money back! Those were the words on Arle’s lips as she stuck her head out of the window, but she fell silent when she saw a suspicious figure standing there.

The person was so short that they must’ve been a child. Their face was hidden with a black cloak and hood. But the dangerous cutlass at their waist made it impossible to mistake them for a hapless and innocent citizen. This was undoubtedly a shady individual.

“Lady Arle, please step back. That’s the terrorist I mentioned!” Scarlet exclaimed.

“That is?”

Though Arle had thought the terrorist would attack the carriage, the shadow passed right by them and ran off towards the palace at an incredible speed. Their legs had likely been enhanced using magic, so it was clear that, whoever this was, they were an exceptionally skilled mage.

“Their plan is likely to attract attention by making a commotion so that they

can go off to destroy the walls,” Scarlet theorized.

“To think a child as young as that would stain their hands with terrorism...” Arle lamented. *What terrible times we’re living in. And even that’s an understatement! I’d thought that the kingdom was more prosperous now, but maybe it just means the shadows cast by the light are even darker than before?*

As Arle considered that, she saw the fleeing terrorist’s hood fall off in the face of a strong gust of wind. What appeared from underneath it was a head of bright red hair. And the owner of that red hair was a familiar—an extremely familiar—child with pale skin and a handsome face.

She felt the breath leave her in a shocked gasp even before Scarlet said, “Isn’t that Lord Carl?”

There was no need to confirm—Arle could recognize him anywhere.

Carl... Carl... My adorable former little brother, Carl... Why are you acting like a terrorist in Heavenrose?!

Arle descended from the stalled carriage and stood there at a complete loss. *Why? Why is Carl here when he’s supposed to be in the empire? And on top of that, he’s a terrorist? My cute, well-behaved, and quiet little brother is a terrorist? Just what happened in the four months since my execution? If my anxious father knew about this, I’m sure he would drown in his worries. If my sickly mother heard about this, I’m sure she would faint again. Jeez... Every time I reincarnated, she would always faint and then wake up, and then faint and then wake up again. Maybe she’s less sickly than I thought? Actually, wait... This isn’t the time to be thinking about that!*

“Let’s go after him, Scarlet!”

“Understood!”

With the Swiftiness spell, Arle strengthened her and Scarlet’s legs, and the two of them pursued Carl, who had run off in the direction of the palace. Even with the boost they received from Swiftiness, Carl was fast. He was incredibly so, in fact. He sliced through the air like it was butter, and if Arle slowed down for even a second, she would lose sight of him. That was hardly a surprise—Carl

was a prodigious mage, after all.

When he was five years old, he'd gotten an unprecedented score of S on his magic test and possessed such talent that the elderly professors from the empire's academy had visited in droves just to see him. On the hundredth offering of Arle's head, he had even prepared to launch a super high-tier spell at the Saint.

Super high-tier spells were incredibly powerful and difficult spells. Mages said to have magical talent would only finally gain use of them after years and years of training and research. Usually, one would be over sixty years old by that point. That Carl could use such spells at age ten easily put into perspective just how much of a prodigy he was.

Of course, his version of the Swiftiness spell was the best in the world. It was capable of speeds that you wouldn't be able to catch up with under normal circumstances. The kingdom's guards, upon hearing about the earlier commotion, had all given chase, but there was no way they could catch Carl. But Arle—Carl's older sister—was a different story.

After all, she'd been reincarnated ninety-nine times, storing up her magic power every loop. There was no way that Arle Phia Earnes would lose to a newbie who, even if he was a prodigy, had only lived for ten years. Also, she was his older sister, so it was a matter of pride.

"I got youuuuuuuuu!!!!!!!!!!!"

"?!"

She caught up to her adorable little brother and gathered him into her arms. Hugging the (understandably) shocked Carl, she leapt into the air and then leapt into the air some more! Arle slipped behind a massive clock tower and jumped onto its roof in order to quickly hide from the guards who'd chased after them.

Phew... Let's calm down for now. Let's all stay calm. The first thing I should do is...

"I'm sorry for kidnapping you out of the blue like this," she said. Arle set Carl down and then crouched so that she could look into his eyes without him needing to crane his neck. Carl still looked surprised, so she reached out as

slowly and calmly as she could and gently held his hand. "I know it's hard for you to believe, but I'm not your enemy."

Carl didn't reply, but Arle didn't let that discourage her.

"Please, could you listen to my story? Just for a little bit? Please...?"

Carl still didn't say anything, but he stared closely at Arle with his dull eyes. It was so nostalgic. Though the two of them hadn't exchanged many words during her past life, there was still a warm feeling spreading through her chest. Perhaps picking up on that warmth, Carl blinked once and then nodded imperceptibly.

"Scarlet, please keep watch for people still after us," Arle ordered.

"Of course, Lady Arle."

With Scarlet gone, it was just Arle and Carl facing each other. Maybe it was only her own bias, but when she looked at him like this, it was really obvious just how adorable he was. When he stared at her with his innocent eyes, she felt her chest tighten with love, which could be gross considering she was his sister. He was so cute that it was bizarre he hadn't grown a pair of angel wings from his back.

Er, wait, this isn't the time for that. Arle gave herself a mental shake and said, "It's very nice to meet you. My name is Arle Phia Earnes. I'm a guardian hailing from the neutral territory of the Amazone Forest, which means that I'm from neither the empire nor the kingdom. So I have no reason to fight against you."

Carl remained silent. But that was hardly a surprise; there was no way that a terrorist would spill the beans about themselves. And even without factoring that in, he had always been a quiet boy.

"Why are you fighting against the kingdom?" Arle continued. "I imagine that if a child like you is carrying out acts of terrorism, then there must be some extreme circumstances behind it."

Scarlet had said that the terrorism up until this point had resulted in no deaths. All of the targets had been buildings, and there was no telling what the responsible party wanted.

Carl remained silent. He still didn't say a single word, but in that moment, Arle heard the quiet murmurings from within his heart.

*(This lady...reminds me of my older sister. She smells...the same...as Alphina...
As my older sister... I LOVE her...)*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
”

OHHHHHHHHH MY GOODNESS. OHHHHHHH MYYYYYYY GOOODNESSSSSS!!!!!!!
HE'S SOOOOOOOOOOOO CUTE! I FEEL LIKE I'M GOING TO LOSE MY
MIND!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! "LOVE"?! HE SAID "LOVE"?! WHILE STARING AT ME
WITH THAT ADORABLE WIDDLE FACE?! I'M THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE SAYING
"LOVE"! CAN I TAKE HIM HOME?! CAN I TAKE HIM HOME AND DRESS HIM UP?!

Taking out a handkerchief, Arle dabbed at her eyes and her mouth and her nose, and then she said, “U-Ummm, all right, could you at least tell me your name? It doesn’t even have to be your real one.”

“Carl.”

Oh, wow. He gave his real name. Can such an honest boy really cut it as a terrorist? As your older sister, I'm worried. Out loud, Arle said, "Hey, Carl, I'm on your side no matter what, all right? I promise."

Carl didn't respond, but he gave yet another soft nod. From the depths of his pure heart, she heard his quiet inner voice, as soft as the pitter-patter of rain against a window. Carl began to narrate the days that he'd spent after Alphina Shinn Sylvana was executed.

Interlude: Carl

For my entire life, I've never understood emotions. I didn't know what it meant to be sad, angry, lonely, or happy. But I knew what "worried" was, because my older sister always felt that for me. My older sister, Alphina, was warm like the sun. She was chatty and always seemed to have a smile for me. But I didn't know what it meant to be happy, so I couldn't smile back.

Alphina told me, "I'm smiling because I want to. If you don't want to smile, then you don't have to push yourself to. There's lots of lies in the world, like saying that something exists when it doesn't, or saying that something doesn't exist when it does. When you don't live a truthful life, it'll do weird things to your heart. So live as honestly as you can. When you're not sure what to do, then listen to your inner voice and live as it tells you. Does that sound all right to you, Carl?"

My older sister was always there for me, even when I was being bullied at school.

"I heard that you're a prodigy?"

"Is that even true? He's more like a doll."

"Doll! Doll!"

"Are you mad? If you want us to stop, then cry or get angry at us, doll!"

When Alphina learned about what was happening to me, she said, "I'll be angry on your behalf since you can't. If you can't smile, then I'll smile for you. If you can't cry, then I'll cry for you. So live your life with your head held high, Carl."

After that, I saw Alphina get in big trouble with our parents. She'd written the word "idiot" on the foreheads of all the kids who were bullying me. With permanent marker too. She hadn't even told me that she was going to do it. And then she got in trouble for me. When I learned about what she'd done, my heart trembled just a little bit. Maybe this was what it meant to be "happy"...?

But my older sister got executed. She was executed because of the Saint. I learned what “sad” was. When I found out that I had been controlled by the Saint, I learned what “angry” was. When I learned that I could never meet my older sister ever again, I learned what “lonely” was. It hurt. It hurt a lot. It hurt so much, in such a painful and terrible way, that it felt like something was wrong with my chest.

Sad. Angry. Lonely. But where was “happy”? What was my happiness? I learned what sad, angry, and lonely were. I didn’t need to know anything else about them. I wanted “happy.” Alphina, my heart wants to be happy. Alphina...

A week after Alphina’s execution, Carl, their parents, and some of the veteran servants were gathered in a room of the Sylvana mansion, staring at each other with grave expressions.

“So the Saint continues to maintain her silence?” Duke Sylvana said bitterly.

In response, the oldest and most experienced of the servants nodded. “Not even the Legal Affairs Bureau has grasped the entirety of the case. The perpetrator is the Saint, after all. With the interference from the church, interrogations are slow, and there have been practically no developments with the investigation.”

“How soft!” Duke Sylvana slammed his fist upon the table. “Isn’t it clear that the Saint used a bizarre spell to control all of us?! What use is there in interrogating her at this point?!”

The butler shrank back at that uncharacteristic display of anger. Duke Sylvana was usually timid, even scathingly referred to as a coward at times. “It is as you say, my lord. But even His Imperial Majesty was under her control. So we have to consider our reputation in the eyes of the other countries, as well as prevent an opening for Heavenrose to take advantage of—”

“That Saint practically murdered our Alphina!” Duchess Sylvana exclaimed in a sorrowful voice. “Should that Saint not face the rightful consequences for her crimes?! Don’t you agree, dear?!”

“Of course,” Duke Sylvana said firmly. “Even if His Imperial Majesty disapproves, and even if the other nobles criticize my stance, I will argue for the immediate execution of the Saint. That’s what I plan on stating in tomorrow’s imperial council. Lord Lionett also seems on board with that idea, so I can count on his support.”

It was rare for Carl’s father to have such a strong opinion on something. Usually, he was unable to assert his claims to other people. And Carl’s mother was much the same. Because she was sickly, she often stayed within the manor, and in the past few years, it had become rare for her to even come out and meet people.

“I shall attend the imperial council with you,” the duchess said. “I must make His Imperial Majesty understand my grief over losing my precious daughter.”

“No, Mary,” replied the duke. “Leave this to me. I understand how you feel, but—”

“No, I’m going! I must take revenge for Alphina! I would be much too pathetic a mother if I didn’t lift a single finger to get justice for her!”

“Hmm, in that case...”

As he listened to his parents debating, Carl was lost in thought. Revenge, that was right. They had to take revenge—for his older sister. It seemed almost as if the very thought of it filled him with “happy.” If they didn’t get their revenge, then it wouldn’t be fair. It wouldn’t be balanced. How could they simply ignore the fact that Alphina’s head had been cleaved from her shoulders, and yet that Saint’s own head remained connected to the rest of her body?

I will get revenge. As soon as he made that decision, Carl noticed something. A large wave of emotion swelled up from inside of him—no, it was an emotion that had *always* been inside of him. *Oh, I see. I... I...loved Alphina...my older sister...*

However, reality was an unkind mistress. Despite the Sylvanas’ expectations, the Saint’s interrogation had stalled. Duke Sylvana petitioned for her execution many times, and neither the emperor nor the prince seemed to have any

objections. But the world's biggest and only religion, the Church of Xenos, stubbornly interfered in all of his efforts. Not even the emperor, who had the most political power out of anyone within the empire, could move freely.

Carl understood a new emotion: disappointment. And it only worsened on the day that he heard the tragic news of the Saint's escape to Heavenrose.

The empire and the emperor are useless. No one is getting revenge for Alphina. Then...

The day that Carl heard the news of the Saint's escape, he disappeared from the manor. He had followed his older sister's words to the letter: *"When you're not sure what to do, then listen to your inner voice and live as it tells you."*

After he left home, Carl contacted the Mordeus Scythe, which was an underground terrorist group. The Mordeus Scythe was the only organization formed under an anti-Xenos banner. Its activities ranged from denouncing the church's tyranny and corruption all the way to using violence to resist the church. If Carl worked with them and used their numbers and intelligence network, he would definitely find a chance to get close to the Saint.

Carl didn't think that it was right to commit acts of terrorism. But his hatred won out over his sense of justice. There was no way he could forgive the Saint, who had killed his sister. Nor could he forgive the church and the Heavenrose Kingdom for protecting her. So long as he could get his revenge, he didn't mind being called a villain.

Though Carl was only ten years old—still so young that he barely qualified as a lad—he was easily allowed into the organization after he showed the members his astonishing magical talent. From the Mordeus Scythe's point of view, Carl's ability to use super high-tier spells made him an impossibly desirable talent.

And so, Carl volunteered for the Mordeus Scythe's "Operation: Reclaim the Saint" and entered Heavenrose along with his peers. In order to get close to the Saint, who was hidden deep within the palace, they had to figure out how to distract the palace's security detail away from their positions. For the past month, he had created diversions and caused destruction in order to

accomplish this task.

Chapter Five

After listening to what had happened to Carl over the past few months via his inner voice, Arle hugged him close to her and gently patted him twice on the back. This was one way Arle had shown affection to her brother back when she was still Alphina. “You’ve been so brave for so long, Carl. It must have been incredibly difficult, fighting alone while surrounded by all of those grown-ups.”

Carl didn’t reply or move. But he leaned, so slight that it felt like a trick of the mind, against Arle’s chest and ever so imperceptibly nodded. When Arle released him from her embrace, there was a calm light in his eyes.

Looking at him like this, it was clear that her brother possessed emotions. He might not have completely realized that Arle was his sister, but he must have noticed *something*. She could practically see the trust in his eyes as he continued to look up at her.

What...should I do? Should I, at the very least, tell Carl that I was Alphina in my past life? But... No, not yet. If, on the off chance, the enemy captures him and they use magic to force him to confess... I can’t be reckless. There’s a chance that my parents in the empire would be put in danger too. I’m just Arle here. I have to act like I have nothing to do with Alphina.

If Arle was going to tell him the truth, it would be after she’d beaten up the Saint. Therefore, what she said to her brother now was, “Hey, Carl. To tell you the truth, I’m also thinking of fighting against the Saint.” He didn’t reply, so Arle continued. “Can you let me and my servant, Scarlet, work with your organization? We share the same goal: defeating the Saint. So I think we could be allies. Could you take me to your leader?”

Carl slightly tilted his head to the side. He looked like he was deep in thought. Normally there was no way for a terrorist to put their trust in someone they had just met for the first time, but Carl gave a small nod.

“Thank you! You have my gratitude, Carl.”

At that moment, Scarlet appeared. All of the guards pursuing them must have given up and left. “It looks like you’ve finished your discussion, Lady Arle and Lord Ca—MMGH.”

Arle hurriedly covered Scarlet’s mouth right before he could say Carl’s name. “This is *Carl*, Scarlet,” she said loudly. “He’s going to introduce us to the leader of his organization. Let’s make haste.”

“I understand,” Scarlet said after Arle released his face. “It’s very nice to meet you, Lord Carl!”

Carl stared straight at Scarlet’s face. *What is it?* Arle wondered. The two of them shouldn’t have met before, even in her past lives. Her brother leaned his focused face close to Scarlet’s confused one and then placed his hand on his own head. After that, he slid his hand towards the top of Scarlet’s head. *Is he comparing their heights?* It seemed that Carl was taller by barely a hair.

Carl let out a loud breath and then, still facing Scarlet, thumped himself twice on the chest. Afterwards, he walked off with a cheery step. It seemed that he was telling them to follow him.

“Lady Arle, what do you think Lord Carl wanted?”

“I don’t know...” Curious, Arle focused her attention on his inner voice.

(I’m the older one! ♪)

The air escaped Arle in a snorting laugh. She remembered that Carl had never had friends his own age. No one had ever treated him like an equal back in school because of his talent, so he spent all of his time alone, reading books in the library. *But even so... Oh dear, oh my goodness, oh my gosh!!! My brother is just too cute!!!!!!*

And thus, with Carl as their guide, Arle and Scarlet arrived at the base of operations for the Mordeus Scythe. The person who awaited them there gave Arle quite the surprise.

“Huh? What the hell, Carl? Who’s that brat and that broad? Why’d you bring ‘em here?!” The harshly spoken syllables pealed out of the mouth of a bespectacled young man with his blue hair slicked back. Though his face was handsome and elegant, he was kind of scruffy all around. His clothes were

covered with stuff like chains and spikes. In other words, he gave off a delinquent-like—or rather, a thug-like—air.

Yet Arle recognized his face. He'd changed quite a bit since their time together, but there was no way she could mistake him for anyone else. They'd spent their youth in the same school, after all. He was—

“Hey, redhead! What the hell'd you c'mere for, huh?! This ain't a place for women like you, yeah?!”

He was Mister Shitty Nerdy Four-Eyes, aka Kithling Ashley, Prince Lionett's right-hand man. Or rather, this was the shell of that man.



Why's Kithling here? He's supposed to be Prince Lionett's advisor! Why's he the leader of a bunch of terrorists? And he looks like he hasn't cared about his appearance in weeks... The questions would not stop flying about inside Arle's head as she looked at Kithling, who stared right back at her.

"Oy, Carl, ya boob, who's this redhead? Why'd you bring an outsider here? Huh?"

Er, why do you keep talking like that? Were you always this kind of person? I've only ever seen you make fun of me while pushing up your glasses. All, "My oh my, Princess Alphina. A woman of your status running around barefoot? Ha ha ha, I wish I had the energy of an uncouth child!" And what's with that slicked-back hair? Were you unable to tame your bed head or something?

From somewhere within his pockets, Carl took out a large sketchbook. After writing something on it, he showed it to Kithling. *"She's an accomplice. Can trust her."* Carl normally didn't speak, so it seemed that he was using this sketchbook to communicate with the terrorists.

Smiling, Arle picked up the edges of her skirt and curtsied. She hoped that they wouldn't notice how her expression was a tad rigid. "It's very nice to meet you. My name is Arle Phia Earnes, and I am the guardian of the Amazone Forest."

"What business does the guardian of a forest that ain't got no loyalties have with Heavenrose?"

"If war breaks out between the kingdom and the empire, then it will cause great harm to my forest. And the reason behind the war that's about to happen is the Saint. I wish to capture her, bring her back to the empire, and have her receive just punishment from His Imperial Majesty."

"Humph! And so you want our help for that?" Kithling drew his face closer to Arle from such an angle that it was as if he were attempting to slash at her from below. She could hear his inner voice say, *(Huh? This woman kind of looks like Princess Alphina.)*

Tsk! So he noticed. The Disrecognition spell should have been in effect, so how could he have recognized her? Perhaps it wasn't enough to simply change

her hairstyle and her voice.

“Humph. Well, it doesn’t look like you’re pullin’ my leg. Plus, Carl trusts you, so I’ll put my faith in you too,” Kithling said out loud.

(Just because they have a similar air to them doesn't mean you can treat her like she's Princess Alphina! Keep that in mind, Kithling! Do NOT smile! You are a tough and stoic warrior...a lonely soldier who lost the love of his life and thus throws himself into battle so that the pain of combat can soothe the agony of his broken heart... Ain't that right?!) Kithling exclaimed to himself internally.

Er... Sure...?

"You have my thanks, Ki— I mean... What should I call you?" Arle asked.

“Ha! What terrorist would tell someone their real name? Call me ‘Blue Lightning.’”

"I understand, Lord Blue Lightning."

AAAAAAAHHHH, HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! B-BLUE
LIGHTNING?! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! W-WAIT, HOLD ON A MINUTE!
DO YOU PLAN TO KILL ME WITH LAUGHTER?! IS THAT THE KIND OF TERRORIST
YOU ARE?!

“It just so happens that we’re gonna hold a meeting,” Kithling said. “Arle, you’re coming with us.”

"Of course. I hope I won't be a bother," she replied.

Thanking the powerful core muscles she'd gained during her time in the forest for preventing her laughter from bursting out of her mouth, Arle followed Kithling to a back room. Inside, about five muscular and broad-faced men stood in a line. It looked like they had planned out their appearances with their blue-haired leader. They sported a rainbow of hair colors: green, yellow, purple, pink, and mulberry.

“Lemme introduce everyone. From the left, we’ve got Green Gale, Yellow Flash, Purple Gaze, Shadow of Pink, and Mulberry Mood. They’re the members of my organization!”

[illegible]

I... I can't anymore... I seriously can't. My core muscles, trained in the wilderness of the mountains, have failed me. I can't stop laughing. Like, I really can't. I'm gonna die...! My breath! I'm gonna...!

Could Arle really defeat the Saint with these bumbling terrorist clowns?

After Arle finally recovered from her near-suffocation incident, she sat at the table with Kithling, Carl, and the top five members of the Mordeus Scythe. There weren't enough chairs, so Scarlet said that he would remain standing, but Carl ran to the warehouse to grab a chair for him. He presented it to Scarlet with a proud huff, his nostrils flaring, and he gestured to the chair like, "*You may sit!*" It was so funny and cute to Arle.

The base of operations for the Mordeus Scythe was in the basement of an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city. It was the perfect location for a hideout, but there were tons of spiderwebs in every room, and it felt terribly unsanitary, what with all the dust. Arle decided that she would find some time to clean it up later. She couldn't possibly let Carl live in an environment as horrid as this.

"All right, listen up, you bastards!" Blue Lightning—*pfft*, otherwise known as Kithling—slammed his hands down on the table. This looked less like a meeting between terrorists and more like a bunch of bandits hanging out. Everyone's colorful hair was styled in a swept-back fashion, as if they had all walked through a storm. "People have been callin' us terrorists, but we only have one goal: to bump off the Saint! Don't forget that! Carl, you didn't cause any civvies to die or get hurt today, did you?"

Carl shook his head. He probably hadn't caused anyone any injuries, but he had completely messed up the carriage and the store's vegetables. Arle would have to pay those people back later. It was a mistake that her little brother had made, so as his older sister, she had to make sure that she cleaned up his mess. Yup, she'd have to make a note of that on her agenda.

But now it was clear that the Mordeus Scythe operated on a philosophy that avoided harm towards innocent civilians. What wholesome terrorists! It made sense, though. If the Mordeus Scythe didn't care about who they killed, then

they would be no better than the Saint. That was the difference between them and Lord Blackrose. Prince Avenlock no longer made any such distinctions. He was so fired up that it seemed he was ready to destroy the world, let alone the empire.

Well, I'm the reason behind that, Arle thought to herself.

"Thanks to us bangin' around for the past month, there's been an increase in the kingdom's guards around town. 'Course, that means the security for the palace ain't as tight as before. It's about time for Operation: Slaughter the Saint."

"Already? Isn't that rushing things?" Green Gale was the one who'd asked that. His name was still within the realm of reason. His hair was green and thus associated with the wind. It was completely understandable. "It's still the palace of *the* Heavenrose Kingdom, even if security's become lax. There are probably a lot more guards and security measures protecting the room where they're keeping the Saint too. Wouldn't it be better to wait a while longer?"

"No, then we would be too late," Yellow Flash objected. His name was also understandable. "If we waste more time than we already have, then war will break out between the empire and the kingdom. There are already tens of thousands of soldiers on the borders. The fighting could happen any second. We must hurry."

"But that's much too rash." This time, the objection was raised by Purple Gaze. This was where the names started to get a bit weird. Wasn't it his hair that was purple, not his eyes? His eyes were black. "Yeah, we've been messing up the kingdom this past month. But in return, we've lost many of our men to the prisons. We're the only ones left now. Even with Carl and his super high-tier magic, what can we do with such little manpower?"

"I agree," Shadow of Pink piped up with a nod. His name was completely incomprehensible. How could the color pink have a shadow? And shadows were normally black, right? Was it meant to be the name of an adult entertainment store?

"Now, now, everyone. Why don't we ask the opinion of our new lady friend?" It was Mulberry Mood who directed the conversation towards Arle with a

gentlemanly attitude. As for his name... Never mind. It was fine.

Arle cleared her throat before she said, “Then I hope you don’t mind if I suggest a strategy of my own. To tell you the truth, I just came back from donating a hefty bribe to the Church of Xenos. With that gold, I’ve applied for a meeting with the Saint.”

“Just how much did you give ‘em?” Kithling asked with a shocked look. “The Church ain’t gonna do anything unless you fork over a small fortune.”

“That’s my little secret,” Arle replied. “I’m sure that there will be security around the Saint herself too, but this is undoubtedly our chance to get close to her. I would like you all to use this meeting to pull off the plan.”

“It’s true that that would be a much surer thing than sneakin’ into the palace and poppin’ her in her sleep,” Kithling concurred.

“However,” Arle continued, “meeting her will be useless unless we finish our preparations first. Without figuring out the layout of the castle and coming up with a detailed plan, I doubt our chances of success would be very high.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ve already obtained blueprints for the palace. So damned detailed that we know every nook and cranny. We’ve got both entry points and escape routes covered.”

Arle stared at Kithling. “You’ve got blueprints for the palace? Those are state-classified documents. And you have them right now?”

“‘Course. How could we think of kidnapping the Saint if we couldn’t pull *that* off at the very least? We ain’t hedgin’ our bets on maybes or what-ifs. If we’re gonna do it, it’s gonna be a definite thing. Right, you bastards?!”

The colorful gang nodded proudly. “Ever since Blue Lightning became our leader, things have been going swimmingly for us,” one of them said.

“Especially when it comes to gathering intel and spying. We’ve been having so much success that it’s like we’re a whole new organization! Never thought changing out the boss could make such a huge difference.”

It seemed that Kithling had the trust of his companions. Of course, he’d been one of the most promising students at school and was considered the right-

hand man of Prince Lionett, so it was hardly a surprise. His sharp and observant mind was still the same as ever underneath his new swept-back hairstyle.

From what Arle could gather, Kithling must've only recently joined the Mordeus Scythe. As with Carl, his enlistment had likely happened after Alphina's execution. If he'd stayed in the empire, then he would have eventually gotten an important job such as a minister or a war strategist. And yet, he had decided to give up those prestigious titles to become a terrorist? Just why would he do that?

What in the world had happened to him since Alphina's head went flying off her shoulders?

Interlude: Kithling

My name is Kithling Ashley, and I was the brightest person in the empire. Everyone knew it too. From kindergarten to high school, I never let anyone surpass me when it came to academics.

As for my noble status, I came from fairly well-respected stock. My father was Earl Ashley, and House Ashley was known for its long legacy of producing civil officials. My father was a minister, and my mother was a professor at the empire's academy. Amazing, no? I was truly a chosen one from a most elite line of individuals.

Well, I was absolutely useless when it came to sports, but... Humph! Physical labor and acts of violence are for barbarians. A well-trained body is absolutely useless without a sharp mind.

Of course, I was also popular with the girls. Yes, though it may sound like I'm being a terrible braggart, the ladies loved me very much. I had my mother's beautiful azure hair and sharp features, along with my noble blood and prodigious intelligence. With that combination, there was no way I wouldn't be popular.

Everywhere I went during my school days, a gaggle of girls would follow me around. It's truly beyond my place, but I daresay that I was more popular than Prince Lionett, with how unapproachably he carried himself. During Prince Avenlock's time at our school as a transfer student, I may have lost the girls' attention to him. But apart from that, I was always number one.

That's right. I was *always* number one. I could get anything I ever wanted. That was the way that things ought to have been...

I first met her at the Hermace High School opening ceremony. Since I was handsome, a noble from a well-respected house, and the valedictorian, I gave a speech in front of all the new students as their representative. In truth, Prince

Lionett was supposed to have given it. But since I was just so brilliant, he let me present it instead. Man, Prince Lionett was such a generous soul! That was the moment I decided that I would serve him in the future.

The ceremony was held in a lecture hall. I was at the front of all the freshmen, waiting for my time to shine, and the person sitting next to me was a girl with hair as red as fire.

If I recall, this is the daughter of House Sylvana? Despite her noble status and the fact that she was seated in the very first row, she made no attempt to hide her huge yawn. Thanks to that, the professor glared at her. *Oh, I see. She's the Barefoot Princess I've heard so much about.*

The numerous rumors about her had reached my ears as well. She was a talented athlete, always full of energy and stamina. She had so much energy, in fact, that she often spun the men who danced with her during parties as if they were nothing more than mere toy tops. She had even been known to grapple with men using her bare hands.

In essence, she was a ridiculous and unsalvageable tomboy. Even when she ran around in the mountains, she was always barefoot. Her excuse was, “I mean, I can run faster this way, right?!” She lacked the delicacy and demureness of a noble lady, and was more like a monkey than anything.

House Sylvana was a noble house with plenty of history. She must have used the name of her deceased grandmother—the famous court magician Lady Yulinar—to become the freshmen girls’ representative. House Sylvana’s high status within the court aside, she was utterly beneath me when it came to both looks and intelligence.

All right, it's my turn to go onstage. Shall I show you what it means to be a real noble?

“Now then, let’s move on to our greetings for the new students. Representing the freshmen class for this year is Kithling Ashley!”

“Here!” As soon as I heard the principal call my name, I stood up. I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose, and the moment that I started to enthusiastically climb onto the podium... *TOOOOOT!*

OH NO! I'VE REALLY GONE AND DONE IT NOW! I REALLY WENT AND BROKE WIND! WHY HERE?! WHY NOW?! WAS IT THE DRIED SWEET POTATOES I ATE LAST NIGHT?! PLEASE, PLEASE, TELL ME THAT NO ONE HEARD IT!

With that desperate prayer in my mind, I glanced around. There was shock written all over the white-haired principal's face, while the vice principal was pressing a handkerchief to his nose and wearing a scrunched-up expression. Behind him, the older students were murmuring amongst themselves.

NOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! THEY ALL NOTICED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! IT'S OVER... MY ROAD TO ELITEDOM... IT'S ALL OVER!!!!!!

My field of vision darkened with despair. But right at that moment, I heard a chair clatter as someone quickly stood up. It was that Barefoot Princess. She scratched the back of her head, and when she turned around to the students and teachers, there was a mischievous smile on her face. In a loud voice, she exclaimed, "My apologies! It was a bit stuffy in here, so I went ahead and made some wind to ventilate the room!"

There was a moment of silence, and it was clear that no one knew what to say. After that beat passed, uproarious laughter rose from the crowd. When I was the culprit, there had been a sort of tension in the air, as if everyone felt like they couldn't laugh. But as soon as she became the one behind it, the tension had turned into hilarity.

I was an honors student whose perfection left no room for mistakes. Meanwhile, she was airheaded, casual, and cheery. Even though it was the exact same fart, people treated it completely differently. In my scenario, the fart would have been a trigger for tragedy. But she'd managed to turn it into a comedy. The difference was in our characters and personalities. Logically, I knew that was the case. But to see such a perfect example of it...

The vice principal coughed several times. He was trying to keep up appearances, but it was clear that he was holding back his own mirth. "Princess Alphina, if you could refrain from doing that! The opening ceremony is a very serious matter."

"My apologies, professor. But as my grandmother—may she rest in peace—always said, 'The best way to hide a secret is to bury it underneath another

secret.’ Everyone here is now my accomplice! Please don’t tell anyone about my little accident just now!”

Laughter filled the room once more. Even the vice principal could no longer suppress it, and he looked down at the ground. But I was the only one who could not see the humor of the situation. I could only stare blankly at the smiling face of the Barefoot Princess as she stuck her tongue out.

Just why? Why would you save me, even if it meant embarrassing yourself?

After the opening ceremony, I stopped her on her way home and took her to the back of the lecture hall, where people seldom walked by.

“Why did you save me?”

“Me? Save you?” She tilted her head to the side, confusion clear on her face.

“Don’t try to worm your way out of an answer! Do you think I, Kithling Ashley, owe you anything after that? What do you hope to gain from this?”

“Oh... By any chance, were you the one behind the toot?”

It was my turn to be perplexed. “D-Didn’t you know?”

“Nope! I didn’t really care who the culprit was.”

“Th-Then during the ceremony, why did you say it was you?”

She smiled impishly, and for some reason, my face grew hot and my heart skipped a beat. “Because if I said it in the way I did, then I could make people laugh, right? I’m not really a fan of uptight situations like that ceremony. They’re so suffocating! Just when I was thinking that I should’ve skipped it and was wondering when it was gonna end, something super interesting happened.”

“Interesting?! That was the embarrassment of a lifetime!”

“It was just a fart. Wow, dramatic much?” she replied with a huge yawn. When I’d seen her yawn during the opening ceremony, I had only thought she looked frivolous, but now I found my eyes drawn to the gesture. Why? Just why? “You should try taking life a little less seriously, Kithling Ashley. You only

live once, you know? Isn't it boring spending the entire time with your knickers in a knot?"

"Only...once..."

"Well, in my case, I've got so much energy I feel like I could live a hundred lives! Anyway, I hope you have a nice day! ♪"

With a wave, Alphina walked off. The only thing I could do was stare at the red hair gently swaying behind her with each step. The only thing I could do was allow my eyes to remain captivated by her...

That was the first time I met Princess Alphina—the first time I fell in love. But at the time, I couldn't accept it. There was no way that I would fall for a tomboy such as herself...was what I tried to tell myself.

When I got married, it would be to a much more sophisticated, introverted, and ladylike woman. That was the kind of woman who was suited for me. There was no way that I would have feelings for someone as barbaric as Alphina.

That's right! Who would fall for such a woman?! With the gallant way she carried herself so that you could feel her strong inner core! With that natural smile, lacking any trace of the flattery that you would normally see in high society! With how she seemed so careless, and yet she was so considerate that she kept an eye out for things no one else paid attention to! I didn't care about any of that! I hated her!

I thought that way for a very long time, all while deceiving myself as to how I really felt. Now, I deeply regretted it. Alphina, now that you're gone, I am truly regretting the past! If only I had been more genuine with myself... If only I had paid more attention to my inner voice...

About a month after Alphina's execution and the Saint's arrest, an Imperial Council was held in the large meeting room within the palace. The emperor and various nobles were all in attendance. The news that the Saint had escaped and fled to Heavenrose had made its rounds throughout the nobility. They had been gathered today to discuss what should be done about the situation.

Of course, both my father, Earl Ashley, and I had been called upon as well. However, two particular people were not part of the discussions. One of them was Alphina's father, Duke Sylvana. The other was the prince of the empire, Lionett Lione. Why hadn't those two been summoned to the Imperial Council? I knew the reason. My intelligent brain was able to suss out the answer easily.

"It wouldn't be advisable to open hostilities with Heavenrose at this point in time," said the elderly general, who was the oldest of the chief vassals. "If we demand the return of the Saint, then they will use that as an excuse for war. It would be one thing if the peaceful King Heavenrose were in charge, but the one who's pulling the strings right now is Prince Avenlock. He has no compunctions and would surely lead the invasion himself."

The emperor shook his head. "It's that sort of weak-willed talk that would lead to us being invaded. Unless we take revenge for Princess Alphina—who was Lio's fiancée, I'll remind you—then we will not be able to maintain the empire's dignity. I wish to use the full military might of the Lione Empire to bring the Saint back within our territory."

"If I may, milord, even if we sent all of our soldiers to attack the kingdom, we would not emerge the victor. I believe it would be wise to wait and see what Prince Avenlock does."

Thus advised the general, and I agreed with him. Usually, attacking required far more manpower than defending. The empire simply didn't have enough soldiers to launch an invasion. Even if we conscripted soldiers in order to reclaim the Saint from the kingdom, we would still lose.

"Then are you telling me to turn a blind eye to the one behind Princess Alphina's murder?!" fumed the emperor. Everyone in the room shuddered in the face of his fury. Though he had apparently been known for his fiery temper in the past, he'd calmed down in his old age. This was my first time seeing the emperor display such rage. "Even if it was under the influence of old magic, all of us treated Princess Alphina like dirt and made fools of ourselves in praising the Saint. All Princess Alphina ever did was support Lio, and yet we executed her, all to appease that hideous Saint. I abandoned the woman who was meant to be my daughter-in-law. Should I not be allowed to atone for my sins?!"

I'd never noticed that the emperor held Alphina in such high regard.

"But we simply cannot win, Your Imperial Majesty."

"I am saying that there are times when we must stand, even when at a disadvantage!"

"But we cannot win," the general repeated in a weak voice. The white handkerchief clutched in his right hand was drenched with sweat. "That is the reality. Should Prince Avenlock be our opponent, then we have no chance of victory. He is an unparalleled genius when it comes to warfare, and if we lose, then our lands will be invaded. Your people will suffer, milord. I empathize with your desire to take revenge for Princess Alphina, but as the one in charge of the army, I simply cannot agree with open war."

The emperor fell silent upon hearing the general's strangled words. The general was the nation's most experienced person when it came to war, and he wanted to take revenge for Alphina as well. But if the empire gathered its soldiers, then it would lead to an open conflict. And if that happened, the empire would lose. As the one in charge of the soldiers' lives, there was no way that he could allow such foolishness.

The emperor must've been painfully aware of the general's internal dilemma. And it was only the fact that he was a sage ruler, not a mad one, that prevented him from prioritizing his personal feelings over the lives of his citizens. In place of the emperor, who had fallen silent, the vassals started to debate how the empire should deal with Prince Avenlock going forth, instead of how they should take back the Saint.

They were all wise members of the cabinet. Rather than focusing on how they could avenge the past, they were looking to what may happen in the future. And that was exactly why Prince Lionett and Duke Sylvana were the only ones who hadn't been summoned to the meeting. If they were present, then they would've focused solely on reclaiming the Saint and taking revenge for Alphina.

I felt disappointed in the emperor, the nobles, and the empire itself. And more than that, I was disappointed in intelligence. Brains were not enough to save Alphina, or to avenge her. Then in that case, I decided the path that I would now walk...

I quietly stood up and left the meeting room. The ministers, too focused on a debate that had no answer, didn't notice me. For all their smarts, none of them saw what I was doing. If brains weren't enough to save Alphina, then I'd become an idiot and a fool. I no longer wanted to be the very best, nor did I want my family status. I didn't need any of those things. Not a damned one of them were able to save Alphina!

Within that same day, I left House Ashley behind. I no longer needed my name, my honor, or my future. In fact, I didn't need anything that would prove useless in my quest to take revenge for Alphina. I would throw everything away. I penned a letter announcing that I would cut ties from House Ashley, and with only the bare necessities, I left the empire. I contacted the Mordeus Scythe, which was an organization working against both the Saint and the kingdom, and joined their ranks.

It just so happened that they'd lost their leader, leaving them disorganized. My natural intelligence allowed me to stand apart from the rest of their numbers, which made them choose me to be their new leader. Of course, I never believed that there was any true justice in terrorism. I knew that I was committing acts of villainy. However, this was the best way to kill the Saint without having to organize a large army or risk harm to the empire.

Blue Lightning—that was the new name I bestowed upon myself after I threw everything away. The new name that I had chosen for myself now that I was in my villain era. *Ah, Princess Alphina! If only we could meet once again, would you think that my name is cool?*

Chapter Six

About two weeks after Arle had contacted terrorist organization Mordeus Scythe, the time had finally come for them to meet with the Saint. The group stepped into Heavenrose Castle. Only four people had been given permission to meet with her: Arle, Carl, Kithling, and Mulberry Mood. The rest were on standby outside of the castle so that they could act as support during the escape after they'd kidnapped the Saint.

Guided by the Xenite who had come to get them, they moved through the castle's garden via carriage. The impressive golden castle was even larger than the one in the empire, and beyond it, there stood a pure-white shrine.

"Is the Saint inside of that shrine?"

"Yes. She prays to Xenos night and day," the Xenite replied.

Kithling clicked his tongue irritably. "What's that broad got to pray for, huh? 'I hope that I can drag Prince Avenlock to bed'?"

"Shh, he'll hear you!" Though Arle quickly silenced Kithling, part of her did wonder if that was the case. She'd heard the Saint's inner voice, so she knew perfectly well that the pure Saint's true nature was that of a man-loving sow. On top of that, she was particularly obsessed with handsome guys.

It seemed that she'd been aiming to become Prince Lionett's bride during her time in the empire, but...she had likely planned on nabbing all of the other handsome men within the empire as well. Kithling and Carl might've been in danger too. Carl was only ten years old, but the sow didn't seem the type to care about such things.

Speaking of Carl, he was staring blankly out of the carriage window. There was a somewhat lonely look to his profile.

"What's wrong, Carl, ya boob? Worried?"

"That's not it. You're lonely, right? You miss Scarlet?" asked Arle.

In response, Carl shook his head with a small purse of his lips, and then he turned to look out the window again. He must have been trying to look tough about missing Scarlet. Arle squeed on the inside.

“Why didn’t you bring that brat, huh? He’s your servant, isn’t he?” Kithling asked.

“I’ve asked him to do something else for me,” she replied. That was the “secret weapon” that she’d prepared, though she had kept it from Kithling and the others. If they knew what she planned, they would definitely try to stop her. It would be best if she didn’t have to pull out her secret weapon, but this *was* enemy territory. Not only that, but their opponent was that nasty and cunning Saint. There was no harm in making sure all of their bases were covered.

The carriage stopped at the entrance to the shrine. A pale-faced Xenite came to greet them with a smile and then he extended his hand. “I trust you are Arle Phia Earnes and her companions? Welcome to our shrine. I apologize for my impertinence, but may I ask that you leave your weapons with me?”

Without a word, Kithling and the others handed over the swords that had been strapped to their belts. They obviously held onto the daggers and such that were hidden underneath their clothes. As the Xenite led the group down the halls of the shrine, Kithling whispered, “Huh, don’t you think it’s kinda weird?”

“Weird?”

“Our intel told us that the Saint was hidden away deep inside the palace. Never thought the broad would just be out in the shrine where anyone could get to her.”

“Yeah...” He was right, but there was also something very strange about this shrine. It looked like your ordinary run-of-the-mill shrine that was built out of stone, and yet there was something off about it. Just in case, Arle focused her attention on the inner voice of the Xenite in front of her.

(Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint, Saint.

Kithling growled.

“Shh! She’s coming!” Arle hissed.

The Saint quietly approached them, swishing the white sleeves of her robes with every step. Her blonde hair was so pale that it looked like mist, and her skin was as white as alabaster and smooth as snow. An unparalleled beauty with delicate features and a gentle smile had just made her appearance.

“Hello, everyone. My name is Debonaire Lua Lightmist.”

Hello there, little miss piggy, Arle thought to herself as she got down on one knee before the Saint. “It is an honor to meet you. My name is Arle Phia Earnes, and I am forever grateful that I have been allowed to witness you with my own eyes, Saint.”

“Please call me Saint Debonaire. I’m so happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Arle.”

Their eyes met directly, and they were so close that they could see every minute detail of each other’s expressions. There wasn’t any particular change in the Saint’s expression.

Phew! It doesn’t look like she’s noticed anything. So Prince Lionett and Prince Avenlock were the weirdos for seeing through the Disrecognition at first glance.

“I heard that you offered a generous amount of charity to the church. You show wonderful faith.”

“Thank you so much! You’re far too kind. To receive such a compliment from someone who has the blessing of our God Xenos... Well, it makes the long journey here entirely worth it!” Arle said, piling on the flattery as best she could.

But in Kithling and Carl’s case, it was clear they were unable to do that. The two of them were on one knee as well, but they had lifted their heads slightly in order to glare at the Saint with obvious hatred in their eyes. From Carl’s perspective, the Saint was the one who had murdered his sister. From Kithling’s perspective...er, it seemed that the Saint was the one who’d murdered the woman he loved? Though, it was a little embarrassing for Arle to think of it that way.

Arle slightly shifted to the side so that she could hide their faces from the Saint. If Debonaire discovered what they were really after thanks to their inability to remain inconspicuous, then the entire operation would end in disaster.

“What is wrong with your two companions?” the Saint asked. “Is there something on my face?”

“No...it’s nothing,” Kithling said as both he and Carl swiftly lowered their faces once more.

“Oh dear, what a waste. The two of you look oh so handsome. Won’t you let me take a closer look at you?” Even though Mulberry Mood was also bowing his head before the Saint, she didn’t pay him a lick of attention. It seemed that her appetite for good-looking men was as strong as ever. She approached Kithling and Carl with a bit of pep in her step.

Ah...don’t do that. You reaaaally shouldn’t do that, little miss piggy. Hey, pig! If you lay your dirty paws—no, your nasty trotters—on Carl... If you touch a single hair on my little brother’s head, I’m not gonna give you an easy death!

But what the Saint touched instead was Kithling’s cheek. “Your blue hair is so beautiful,” she said kindly. In response, Kithling shuddered. It looked like it was half from anger and half from disgust.

C’mon, keep it together, Blue Lightning! If you lose your temper here, then our entire plan’s gonna go down the drain!

“Pray tell, what is your name?” the Saint asked.

For a moment, Kithling didn’t respond. But then he finally said, “My name is Cobalt Thunder, my Saint.”

Is that your idea of a fake identity?! That’s pretty much exactly your terrorist name! Arle desperately wanted to yell that out loud. He was supposed to be the smartest person in the entire empire, but his naming sense was absolutely terrible.

“My, what a lovely name!” the Saint said with a cheery smile. “You’ve changed not only your hairstyle, but your name as well? Lord Kithling Ashley?”

Arle froze at the sudden words. *Huh? What did she just say? Did she say “Kithling”? Wait, doesn’t that mean she’s seen through our disguises?!*

Kithling was about to jump to his feet when suddenly a mountain of muscles slammed into his back. It was Mulberry Mood, using his thick arms and chest to restrain Kithling from behind. Everything moved so fast that neither Arle nor Carl could do anything to stop him. The dagger that Kithling had been about to pull out from his pocket dropped onto the ground with a sharp clank.

The Saint kicked the weapon away as if it was as insignificant as a pebble and smiled—no, smirked—at them all. “Heh heh heh, did you think that you’d be able to pull the wool over our eyes, Lord Kithling?”

“Wh-Why...?!”

“I’ve long had the church keeping an eye on the Mordeus Scythe. They *are* our enemy, after all. So I had my loyal Xenite here sneak into your ranks.” She confidently pulled out a knife and placed the tip of it against Kithling’s throat. “Don’t move, you two. If I see you twitch a single muscle, then our dear Lord Kithling’s lovely white face will be...*PSHHH!* Covered in red.”

She’d even recognized who Carl was. Kithling moved his limbs as best he could to try and escape from the ripped arms imprisoning him, but Mulberry Mood didn’t look bothered at all.

To think that he’s actually a spy! I should’ve paid more attention to his inner voice! I let my guard down because of his stupid name!

“M-Mulberry Mood, why?! Why did you betray us, ya boob?!”

“I was always a member of the Church of Xenos. Plus, I’ve got business with you!” Mulberry Mood yelled as he tightened his grip around Kithling. “I’m a holy man in the service of the great God Xenos! And yet you gave me such an idiotic name! This is the first time I’ve ever been so humiliated!”

So you really did hate your name! And wait, Kithling, you were the one to name them?! This is all your own fault!

“Mulberry, don’t kill him.” Even though the Saint was calling him by the so-called idiotic name, he ignored it. He must have also been hypnotized. “I’ve had my eye on Kithling ever since my time in the empire. Carl, you as well.”

A number of Xenites entered the room, with Arle and Carl being restrained by two people each from either side. With the Antimagic barrier up, no one could cast any spells.

“...!”

“Don’t fight, Carl!” Arle ordered. “Stay calm for now!”

In response, Carl bit his lip in frustration.

“My adorable little Carl! ♪ I suggest listening to that ugly woman’s advice.” The Saint—no, the sow—had a smarmy grin on her face, clearly enjoying her victory. If Arle had still been able to hear her inner voice, then she would’ve probably been forced to listen to a medley of “squee hee hees.”

“Miss Arle not ugly!” Carl yelled furiously. He tried to jump at the Saint, but she was easily able to hold him back. When it came to physical combat, he was far too weak to put up much of a fight.

“Hmm, Arle, was it? I have no idea who you are, you ugly little wench, but I’m gonna have to ask you to die here!” said the Saint.

“Ah!” Arle yelled as the men restraining her dragged her towards the walls.

In the center of the room, the Saint was still speaking with Kithling and Carl. “Why don’t you two become mine? I’ll be gentle.”

“You mean you want us to join your church? Ha! You wish,” Kithling said with a glare, but the Saint serenely shook her head.

“There’s no need for you to become something as pathetic as a Xenite. The only person you need to believe in is me. All you have to do is keep your eyes on me and stay by my side. I’m the only person you need to kneel for. See? Doesn’t that sound easy?”

The Saint was supposed to be a servant of Xenos, and yet she’d called the Xenites “pathetic.” If an innocent believer was to hear that, they would surely faint at the blasphemous words. But the Xenites who had their arms on Arle didn’t change their expressions at all. More like, they’d been completely expressionless the entire time. So they must’ve been hypnotized. All of the Xenites in the room were men with fairly attractive faces. It seemed that the

boy-crazy Saint was picky when it came to her personal guard. The reason she was talking to Kithling and Carl probably had something to do with that as well.

“Come on, Carl. Stop being stubborn. Why don’t you become mine?” she asked. When he didn’t reply, the Saint continued. “Think about it. You were so bored in the empire. You didn’t have any friends because no one around you could keep up with your smarts, right? There’s no more need to fret about that! I’ll let you forget all about your pain and loneliness. All right?”

She’s even going to try and get with a ten-year-old boy? Just what is wrong with this girl? If Xenos really does exist, then why hasn’t he sent down a bolt of lightning to strike this girl dead?

Carl’s answer was a single word: “No!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“The only person I like is Alphina! Who would like someone like *you*?!”

Carl... I’m so happy! You’re gonna make your sister cry!

“Good words, Carl, my man!” Kithling shouted. “I’m the same! I have no intention of bowing to any woman other than Alphina! As Prince Lionett’s right-hand man, I’d always planned on serving at her side once they got married! Yet you went and destroyed that future!”

The Saint grinned toothily as she looked between the two of them. “Heh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha. AAAAHHHH HA HA HA!” She started laughing in a loud voice. “And here I was wondering whatever the problem could be! Alphina... Alphina, you say?! That pathetic princess whose head went sailing off her shoulders? I’d *completely* forgotten about her! Squee hee hee!”

And there it is, ladies and gentlemen. That “squee hee hee” laugh. She’s not even bothering to hide her true piggy self.

“Hey, waaaait a second. Aren’t you hating on the wrong person here?” the Saint continued. “I mean, *I* wasn’t the one who sent that woman off to the guillotine. *You* lot were.”

“That’s because you used your Geis on us!”

“Diiiiid I? I don’t remember thaaaat. The emperor was the one who sentenced

her to death, and you and the prince all agreed with it, riiight? I don't think that you should go around blaming other people for your criiiimes! ♪"

If the empire ever held a competition to see who could talk in the most annoying fashion, then Saint Debonaire would definitely win. Kithling gritted his teeth together so hard that they audibly clicked, and Carl's lips tightened. The Saint beheld their frustrated expressions with a satisfied look in her eye. "I wasn't the one who killed that duke's daughter. *You* were! And *now* you're going around crying 'Alphina, Alphina'? Like, shuuuuut up! She's long dead, you dummy! She's probably crying in the afterlife about how much she wishes she had my beautiful looks!"

Tears welled up in Carl's eyes. He must have been trying to say something in retaliation because he opened his mouth, but in the end, he closed it again.

"Huh? Are you gonna cry? Hey, little boy, you're gonna cry? Even though you're a guy? Huh? Huh??? Then go ahead and cry! ♪ Cry! ♪" The pig danced from side to side as she continued to taunt Carl.

He tensed up as if he was trying to hold something back, but the tears pooling in his eyes continued to get bigger and bigger until... *Drip. Drip, drip.* They slid down his cheeks and fell from his chin, staining the ground around Carl's feet.

"Yaaaay, thanks for the tears, you beautiful little boy!!!!!! Aaahhhh!!!!!! I just wanna lick 'em allllll up! ♪" Her high-pitched "squee hee hee" laughter filled the room, echoing off the walls. Carl's tears didn't stop.

POP. At that moment, Arle heard it—the sound of something snapping within her head. It might have been a vein. Or perhaps it was a nerve. Or maybe it was even a button that existed within her brain that she'd never bothered to press before, and that sound had come from her finally pressing it.

It's fine now, right? I don't have to hold myself back or withstand this anymore. She's gone and not only insulted my precious little brother, but my old school friend as well. There's no reason in the world that I have to put up with this!

"Guh?!"

"Gah!"

Pained voices rang out on either side of Arle. She had slammed her elbows into the Xenites' stomachs when they'd let their guards down. They collapsed forward, out cold, and the hands that had been holding Arle back loosened. The Saint was so busy squee hee hee-ing that she didn't even notice. Slamming her heels against the ground with each step, Arle approached her.

"Hey, wait, you—!" Mulberry Mood stepped forward to try and stop her, but Arle smashed her fist right into his face. He fell to the ground, blood gushing like a fountain from his nose. She simply stepped over him and continued on her way. That was when the Saint finally noticed Arle.

The Saint stared at her with a foolish expression, like she was wondering, "*Huh? Why?*" and Arle slapped her right cheek.

"Squee?!"

All right. She did it again, on her left cheek.

"Squee!!!!!!!"

The Saint flew backwards, screaming like a pig in agony, and fell onto the ground. Arle stared down at her as she continued to lay there.

"I'm sure you felt nice and safe in this Antimagic room, but I was always better with using muscle than magic anyway. Didn't you know that about me?"

"Wha—? Just who are you?!"

"I'm Arle Phia Earnes, a princess from the Far East and the guardian of a neutral forest... Well, that was who I had hoped to pass myself off as. But I can't do it anymore. I can't stand you anymore. There's no redemption for you, nor do I plan on letting you try to redeem yourself."

"Arle, you...sound completely different," Kithling said, staring at her.

"Yes... It's about time for the potion to wear off."

The voice-changing potion that Arle's grandmother had brewed would lose its effect unless continually consumed at certain intervals. It lasted about a day and a half, so Arle had made a habit of drinking some every morning. Except, she hadn't had any today. She had chosen to forgo it just in case. If full disclosure had proved unnecessary, then she'd planned on secretly taking some

to remain as Arle, but...

This sow so easily crossed the line. “I’m sorry, Carl. I’ve forced you to go through such pain. None of it was your fault, so don’t blame yourself.”

Carl was staring at Arle as if he was seeing something unbelievable. The Disrecognition magic was slowly dispelling, little by little. It must have looked like Arle was turning into another person right before their very eyes. At the end, her hair fell out of the ponytail, and...

“Ah...ahh...” Quiet groans, more akin to whimpers, rose from Carl.

“Oh...ohh...” Tears practically streamed out of Kithling’s eyes.

“N-No way?! Why?!” The sow’s mouth hung open. She was truly a vulgar woman.

Before her captivated audience, Arle—although, in truth, she was Arle no longer—picked up the edges of her skirt and curtsied. It was unfortunate that it wasn’t a dress instead, but unlike a certain Saint, she could never forget her manners. In the end, she really couldn’t escape her princess upbringing.

“My name is Alphina Shinn Sylvana. In order to stop the Saint’s villainy, I have returned from the grave.”

Interlude: Lionett (2)

Let's now turn back time—to the night before Arle and the others infiltrated the castle.

The location was the palace in the empire's capital city, Lione. There, Lionett Lione, the crown prince, spent his sleepless nights swinging a sword. "Hah! Hah!" he shouted while he incessantly continued to practice swordsmanship from his bedroom's balcony.

About a month had passed since the incident in the Amazone Forest. The wounds that he'd suffered during his bout with the Flame Dragon had completely healed. To prepare for the upcoming battle with Prince Avenlock, Lionett spent every day training hundreds of his soldiers in swordplay. Even if the soldiers collapsed from exhaustion, Lionett didn't stop. Even if his sword broke, he immediately called for someone to bring him another. Until his body reached its limits and he collapsed into a pool of his own sweat, Lionett never stopped training.

Unlike his rigid swordsmanship, Prince Avenlock's fighting style was free-spirited. That made it hard to predict his moves, and slashes would come at Lionett from unexpected angles. *If we had continued our duel, would I have emerged the victor? If Arle hadn't stepped in between us, would I have lost?* That uncertainty would not leave Lionett, even when he was in bed.

In the end, he would always get back up within the hour and stand on the balcony, slicing through the night air with his sword. Eventually, Lionett stopped his swings and returned to the room, looking about. The entire room was filled with bright red pressed flowers. Alphina—that was the name of the plant. And it was the name of his former fiancée as well.

Every spring, he would order his servants to go and pick alphina flowers. He'd even gone and picked some himself. The only way that Lionett knew how to heal the loneliness within him was by decorating his room with these flowers,

so vivid red that they practically burned.

On the white wall in the southern side of his room, he had hung a pendant. It was wooden, carved into the shape of a bear. When he'd gone on a crusade to wipe out the northern barbarian tribes, Alphina had given it to him as a protective amulet. He knew that it wasn't right to hang a protective amulet in his room, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to wear it. What if he'd lost it in the thick of battle? Or what if he was killed, and the barbarians took it away as a trophy of war? The hypothetical scenarios had been too much to stomach, and thus, he'd ended up using it to decorate his walls.

I'm such a coward. Lionett had never imagined that he was such a weak-willed person. "Golden Sword," "Lord Cold Heart," "sword prodigy," "hero"... If the people who referred to him with such accolades were to see him now, what would they think? *No... The only time I become so pathetic is when Alphina's involved. Have I gotten weaker on account of her presence in my life?*

Lionett didn't know. But he knew that even if he was the weakest man on the earth, there was one battle that he absolutely mustn't lose. Avenlock Heavenrose, the prince from the neighboring kingdom... Now that Lionett knew Avenlock had also been in love with Alphina, he had to emerge the victor. And until he killed the Saint that Avenlock was hiding away...

Right when Lionett was about to return to his training, he felt the presence of something landing on the balcony. "Who's there?!" he asked sharply. Was it an assassin from a foreign nation? Or perhaps one sent by the Saint? But instead, what stood there was a beautiful white cat. "A cat? What is a cat doing here?"

The security around Lionett's room was second only to that of the emperor's bedroom. Not even a cat should've been able to slip its way inside, so how had this one made it to the balcony? As Lionett continued to stare at it in befuddlement, he heard a voice inside of his head.

"Long time no see, Prince Lionett."

"A talking cat?!" It must've been the Saint's familiar. Lionett gripped his sword tighter. But then, a pale light engulfed the white cat's body, becoming larger and larger as it took on the shape of a human. After the light faded, a young red-eyed boy wearing a butler uniform stood in the cat's place. "Oh. If I recall,

you were with Arle...”

“Yes. My name is Scarlet, Your Highness.” The boy who’d transformed from a white cat offered a polite bow. Seeing that there was a somewhat frantic look on Scarlet’s face, the prince lowered his weapon. “Please allow me to apologize for my sudden visit,” the boy continued. “However, this was the only method available to me.” He stared straight at Lionett. “The time is now. We need your power...in order to save Lady Alphina.”

Chapter Seven

And so, Arle's true identity as Alphina had been discovered. It had been a good run, even if it felt like scarcely any time had passed since she'd started her new life.

"Wh-Why?! Princess Alphina?! You're alive?"

Yeah, I'm not surprised that you're surprised, Kithling, she thought. He was so shocked that his voice had returned to the tone of Kithling Ashley, rather than that of Blue Lightning.

"It's a long story, and kind of complicated to explain, so can we save it for another day?" Alphina replied with a smile as she completely glossed over his confusion.

She used the dagger on the ground to cut away the ropes binding Kithling's and Carl's arms, and as soon as he was freed, Carl threw himself against Alphina's chest. He didn't ask any questions, nor did he say anything. He simply pressed his face, wet with tears, against her.

"I'm sorry, Carl. I'm really sorry for everything..." As her brother continued to cry, Alphina gently ran her hands down his back. She wanted to stay like this forever and savor the joy of reuniting with her family—just the two of them—but it was hardly the time for that. She had to do what she'd come here to do!

"Oh, I know! You're Alphina's ghost, aren't you?! Say that you are!" the pig declared, her cheeks swollen and red from the slaps. "So the voice I heard after I made you off-er your head really *wasn't* a hallucination! Wandering out of the grave like this? Ha! Don't you know when to die, ugly?"

Hmm. So she thinks I'm a ghost? That's cool. It saves me the energy of explaining, so let's just go with that!

"Even if you're a ghost, I'm not gonna go easy on you if you get in my way. I'm going to send you right back to where you belong!" The Saint snapped her fingers, and when she did so, a number of armed soldiers poured in from the

back room. There were about ten of them, and of course, all of them were handsome. And yet, none of them had any life to their expressions. They were probably hypnotized members of her personal guard.

Kithling held up his dagger and said, "This isn't good, Princess Alphina."

"I agree. We're way outnumbered!"

It was impossible to go up against ten armed soldiers with a single dagger. Even if Alphina was a good fighter, her physical strength was that of a regular woman. Earlier, she had been able to get the upper hand because the Xenites had let their guards down, but there was no way she could win in a fair fight.

It would've been one thing if this was a battle of wits, but she couldn't expect much from Kithling in a physical fight. In an Antimagic room, Carl couldn't use his spells. In this situation, their only lifeline was the secret weapon that she had entrusted Scarlet with.

Just when Alphina was hoping that Scarlet would make it in time, she heard it: the sound of multiple people's footsteps on the staircase that they had descended from earlier. For a second, she thought that Scarlet had arrived, but something wasn't right. The footsteps were heavy. It was clear that they were adults' footsteps, and not that of a child. Armed adults, at that.

More reinforcements for the Saint? Oh please, that's the last thing we need.

But someone else entirely appeared from the staircase.

"Just what is the meaning of this?" the man said. He had dark skin and voluminous black hair. His face was handsome, with sharp eyes, but there was a somewhat dangerous air about him. In the past, he'd had relations with noble daughters and princesses from all around the world, and every single one of those relationships had ended with the girls in tears. He was a powerful warrior who bore the title of "dragonslayer." It was Avenlock Heavenrose, prince of the Heavenrose Kingdom. "Alphina, you're supposed to be dead. Why are you here?"

The gaze that he fixed upon her was so cold that it sent shivers down Alphina's spine. His voice was frigid. It was as if he and the man from the Amazone Forest were completely separate people. She found it difficult to

believe that this was the same man who'd shown off his wonderful singing skills just the other day.

Could he be under the Saint's control too? ...No, that's not it. There was a strong will behind his dark eyes. To begin with, the reason Alphina currently felt like they were two separate people was because she'd been able to hear his inner voice in the Amazone Forest. Without knowledge of what was going on behind the scenes, the impression he gave off—that of a man with a dangerous air about him—was still the same as in their school days.

As soon as she saw him, the Saint quickly switched her attitude from that of a pig to that of a demure young lady. “Oh my, if it isn't Prince Avenlock! You came at just the right time.”

“I only came here because it's time to pray. Saint, this is quite the little ruckus you have going on. Care to explain why Alphina, who's supposed to be dead, is standing before us? Is this an illusion of your design? A spell?”

“No... That is a ghost—the ghost of Princess Alphina.”

“Ghost?” Avenlock's gaze grew even sharper, practically piercing through Alphina.

“I hear that in the old magic, there's a spell called ‘Necromancy,’” the Saint explained. “It allows you to take control of ghosts. Someone must have wanted the powerful magic of House Sylvana's line and dug her up from her grave. Yes, that must be it!”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“Surely you recognize that man over there with the blue hair?”

At the Saint's words, the prince turned his attention to Kithling, who still looked somewhat lost. “If I recall, his name is Kithling or something like that. He's Prince Lionett's advisor, isn't he?”

“Yes, you're absolutely correct. He's an assassin sent from the empire. Kithling infiltrated the country as a terrorist and snuck into this shrine to try and murder me.”

“N-No, that's not true,” Kithling said quickly in self-defense. “Prince Avenlock,

|—”

“Shut up.”

At the prince’s sharp command, he fell silent.

Avenlock continued. “To think that you would manipulate even the dead. What shameless behavior! It’s exactly the kind of despicable scheme that one of Lionett’s subjects would come up with.”

It seemed that Lord Blackrose had chosen to believe the Saint. But Alphina couldn’t blame him. Not even the old magic had a spell to completely revive the dead, so it made sense that he would think Necromancy was at play. If only she could hear his inner voice, then she might’ve been able to do something, but...

“Long time no see, Prince Avenlock. Don’t you remember me? I’m Monkeyna, expert climber.”

“Shut up. Don’t talk like her while wearing her face.”

“We often argued like this during our school days, didn’t we? Ah yes, like the time you made Flora cry...”

“Didn’t you hear me tell you to shut up, phantom?” Prince Avenlock snarled as he unsheathed the sword at his belt. “I don’t know what kind of sorcery this is, but desecrating the dead is an unforgivable offense. I shall cut you down with my own hands.”

It’s no use, huh? Alphina had tried to talk about things that only the two of them knew about so that he would believe that she was actually alive, but that seemed to have backfired. Avenlock was even more suspicious of her now. And of course, there was no way the prince would’ve come here alone. Powerful-looking guards stood at the ready behind him. The Saint and Mulberry Mood took a step back, obviously content to watch things play out.

There was no escape.

“Carl, get behind me.” Alphina placed herself in front of her brother, protecting him with her body. The tears had not yet dried on his cheeks.

“I apologize, Princess Alphina,” Kithling said from beside her. “We were finally able to meet once again, and yet...”

“It’s not your fault. Besides, it’s still much too early to give up.”

“There’s no hope for us anymore! Our opponent is Lord Blackrose. If there’s anyone out there who can defeat a dragonslayer, then our most likely candidate would be Prince Lionett, who’s a dragonslayer himself. We can no longer—”

But Alphina shook her head and raised her dagger. She’d survived, even after a hundred executions. Like hell she would just roll over and give up now!

“Prince Avenlock, I would like to challenge you to a duel. Just you and me.”

“You’re nothing but a ghost, and you think you can take me on in a fight?”

“I’m just not the kind of girl who’d go down without a struggle. Now, raise your weapon.”

For a moment, Prince Avenlock remained silent. When he next opened his mouth, it was to issue an order to one of his guards. “You, let her borrow your sword. Cutting down a woman armed only with a dagger would be an insult to my name. Now, hand it over to her.”

“Prince Avenlock, do *not* underestimate that ghost!” the Saint yelled furiously. “Please just go ahead and slice her into bits!”

“I shall ask you to watch in silence,” Prince Avenlock replied coolly. “This is *my* fight. Even if you *are* the Saint of Xenos, I shall not go easy on you if you try to interfere.”

The Saint fell silent with an irritated look on her face.

Taking the sword from the guard, Alphina adjusted her stance. As she pointed the blade’s tip towards the prince, she whispered to Kithling behind her, “I’m going to create an opening, so take Carl and make your escape.”

“Are you telling me to run and leave you behind? No! Unless you’re coming with me, I—”

“Alphina! It’s dangerous! Don’t do it! Let’s escape together!”

It was one thing to be asked by Kithling, but it was another to be asked by Carl. Alphina felt her determination waver for a second before she shook her head. “This is the only way. Please, just listen to me, all right?”

The prince lunged at her and brought his sword down upon her head, but she managed to block the blade with her own.

“Kuh!” What a powerful blow! It feels like both the sword and my arm are going to break just from the weight of it!

“What’s wrong? Is your waist about to give out from a single thrust?”

“As if!” Alphina used all of the momentum in her body to push the blade back, and then, aiming for Avenlock’s right shoulder, she lunged forward with her sword! Though the prince dodged it without breaking a sweat, she didn’t let that stop her. She continued to thrust—again and again and again. Even if the prince avoided her blade, she didn’t stop. If she kept on the offensive, she could push him backwards. And that meant she could create some distance between him and Kithling and Carl. “Now! Run!”

As soon as she yelled that, Prince Avenlock once again made his move. This time, he slashed outwards in a sideways sweep, aiming for Alphina’s abdomen. *So fast!* Under normal circumstances, she probably wouldn’t have been able to see through it. The only reason she was just barely able to make out the blade’s path was because she had witnessed the duel between Avenlock and Lionett in the forest, and it had left its mark in her memory.

She immediately flipped her grip on the hilt and received the attack with the length of the sword. But unfortunately, she was an untrained woman. Even if she could stop the blade itself, she couldn’t stop the force behind it. Alphina flew backwards, as easy as the wind blowing leaves off a tree, and she slammed her back against the stone wall.

“Yahoo!!!!!!! Squee hee!!!!!!!”

She could hear the little piggy’s cheer. “*You’re completely letting out your true nature,*” is what Alphina would have liked to say, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t say anything. She couldn’t even breathe. The only sounds that came from her throat were rasping gasps, sounding more like someone with a pulmonary illness than anything else.

“I’m impressed you were able to block my attack.” Prince Avenlock’s cold voice sounded in her ringing ears. “But I doubt that you can even stand up. That hit just now should’ve broken two or three of your ribs. If you try to move, then

your broken bones will pierce through your lungs.”

“Heh heh...” With her bloodied lips, Alphina smiled. Her voice finally cooperated with her. “What a kind thing to say to a ghost.” Using her sword like a cane, she stood up. She could barely support herself, and her knees were trembling like those of an old woman. But even so, she had managed to get back onto her feet.

“You can still stand?” The tone of Prince Avenlock’s voice had changed. “Could you be...? Could you actually...really be...Alphina?”

Upon hearing his shocked murmur, Alphina grinned at him while fighting back the pain lancing through her body. “What woman other than your precious Alphie would be this stubborn, Prince Avenlock?”

Prince Avenlock didn’t say anything, but a strangled breath escaped from his mouth. His sharp eyes widened in shock. In that exact moment, the deafening roar of an explosion sounded from outside the room. At the same time, the room—no, the entire shrine—shook violently.

“An earthquake?!” someone yelled.

Clouds of dust started to billow down from the ceiling while several loud booms rang out, as if the shrine had turned into a construction site. Earthquakes didn’t make a noise like that. The booming continued, growing gradually louder and louder. While the prince and the Saint were distracted, Kithling and Carl hurried over to Alphina.

“Alphina, are you okay?!” Carl exclaimed.

“Grab onto my shoulder! We’ll take advantage of the confusion to escape!”

“Oh my...” With one hand against her aching side, Alphina smiled. “Why in the world would we need to escape when our counterattack is about to begin?”

“Counterattack?” Kithling echoed. “What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you say it yourself just now? That the only person who can compete with this dragonslaying prince is another dragonslayer?”

Behind her, the wall collapsed—or rather, it was destroyed by someone. The one who broke through the stone wall and appeared before them was the loyal

butler Scarlet, with his white hair and crimson eyes.

“Lady Alphina! Lord Carl! Are you two all right?!” he exclaimed.

From behind him, a tall man appeared, walking through the cloud of dust rising from the broken wall. He had blond hair and bright blue eyes, the latter of which glowed so intensely that the bards often compared them to lightning in their songs about the empire’s beloved hero.

“Alphina!” It was Prince Lionett. “On behalf of the empire, I’ve come to save you! But it is on my word as Lionett Lione that I vow, this time for sure, I’ll rescue you, my Alph!” His blond hair was uncharacteristically mussed up, but what caught Alphina’s attention was the thing hanging from his neck: a wooden pendant in the shape of a bear.



It was the protective amulet that Alphina had gifted him on his way to war so many lifetimes ago.

Ha ha... You really know how to make a girl happy, Prince Lio. But, um...your voice is so loud that it's making my broken ribs ache...

Let us briefly return to a night three days prior. As preparations to infiltrate the castle were underway, Arle and Scarlet found some time to privately discuss things together.

“Scarlet, I’d like you to handle something for me elsewhere.”

“What?! Will you not allow me to remain by your side, Lady Arle?” he protested. “I’m worried about Lord Carl as well. Please let me accompany you two to Heavenrose Castle!”

Arle shook her head in spite of Scarlet’s protest. “There’s a job much more important than accompanying us that I want you to do. It’s a mission that only you can complete.”

“Something that only I can do?”

“I’m willing to bet that there’s traps set up where the Saint lives,” Arle explained. “Even if Carl and I can use powerful spells, we’ll be useless if she somehow makes it so that we can’t access our magic.”

“Do you mean Antimagic? Oh no, do you think that they’ve cast it upon the castle?”

“The Saint is able to proficiently wield even the old magic Geis. It’s not out of the realm of possibility, is it?”

Scarlet swallowed. “I understand. What would you have me do?”

“I’m going to cast Swiftness on you. I’d like you to hurry on back to the empire. Take the route through the forest.”

“The empire?” Scarlet echoed.

“I’d like for you to meet with Prince Lionett,” Arle continued. “Tell him what’s going on, and have him move his army to the Amazone Forest. This is so that as

soon as we capture the Saint, we can hand her over to the authorities.”

“I see.”

“And here, take this. It’ll be our secret weapon, just in case.” Arle handed Scarlet two magical green gems.

“These gems are like the ones that Prince Avenlock used, aren’t they?” Scarlet asked.

“Yep. They’re mediums for Teleportation. I’ve set it so that they’ll take you to Heavenrose Castle, but since I made them in a rush, I was only able to prepare the ones for the return journey.”

“But there are two here. Can’t we use one for the trip there and another for the trip back?”

“You’re misunderstanding. One of them is for you, and the other one...is for Prince Lionett.”

Scarlet’s crimson eyes widened in surprise. “Do you mean to say that your secret weapon is to bring Prince Lionett to Heavenrose Castle?”

“Just in case of an emergency,” Arle corrected.

“Um, what do you mean?” Scarlet queried uncertainly, and Arle handed him a magical white gem that was different from the green ones.

“On the day of the operation, I’m going to send magic to this gem every thirty minutes. Every time I do that, it should glow red. If it stops doing that, then that means something has happened to us. And if that happens...I’d like you to tell the prince *everything* and bring him to us.”

“Everything?”

“You can tell him literally everything. From the fact that Arle is actually Alphina to the way that she took on a new identity after surviving the execution. I don’t believe that you’d be able to get the prince to do anything unless you told him that much.”

Scarlet nodded with a serious look on his face. “I understand. Your determination knows no bounds, Lady Alphina. I shall obey your command.”

“Thanks, Scarlet,” she said. “But it’s really a last resort, so let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Agreed. But are you really all right with that? You were finally able to live the life you wanted as Arle.”

“Yeah...” It wasn’t as if Arle was completely fine with it all. But the plan was too much of a gamble to go through without *some* form of insurance. In any case, it was best for her to ignore all that and focus on Operation: Reclaim the Saint for now.

In the end, the situation at the shrine had necessitated Alphina’s secret weapon. But ultimately, it wasn’t as if they had any choice in the matter. The greatest variable in Operation: Reclaim the Saint was the fact that Prince Avenlock might intervene at some point. The only person who could actually put up a fight against him was Prince Lionett, who was a hero just like him.

“Oh, Alphina... Alph... I’m so glad that you...that you’re...” Lionett said, his eyes fixated on her.

“Long time no see, Prince Lionett. Unfortunately, as you can see by my current condition, I’m not exactly able to greet you in the proper fashion. I apologize for that,” Alphina said. It hurt to even converse with him.

“Look at this pendant,” Lionett continued, tears in his eyes. “This is the protective amulet that you gave me for battle, Alph.”

“Yes, I remember that,” she replied. “And here I thought that you hadn’t put it on because you hated me...”

“Of course not! You can blame it all on my cowardice. I feared the thought of falling in battle and having it taken away from me by the enemy. But I am no longer afraid. I will definitely live through this day and return to the empire with you!” Prince Lionett leveled a fierce glare at Prince Avenlock. “Are you the one who did this to my fiancée, Avenlock?”

But Prince Avenlock didn’t reply. He stood there, completely still, his sword hand limp and lifeless by his side. He wasn’t even looking at Prince Lionett. All of his attention was focused on Alphina as she lay in Scarlet’s arms.

“So you weren’t a ghost...?” Prince Avenlock murmured, pained.

“To call her a ghost when she’s so full of life? You’re hardly worth my time anymore, Blackrose,” Prince Lionett scoffed.

“How...? How did you come back to life?!” Prince Avenlock exclaimed, ignoring Lionett’s words. “No, the how doesn’t matter. If you’re truly alive, then —”

“There’s no need for you to know!”

A sharp *scree* rang out in the room. It was the sound of Prince Lionett closing the gap between himself and Avenlock. He had stepped clean through the hard stone floor, leaving behind the shape of his foot. The strength behind an expert swordsman’s lunge was just that powerful, and he placed the might of the acceleration upon the tip of his blade.

The strike was so fast that it bordered on the divine, but Prince Avenlock blocked it with his sword. However, that was all he’d managed to do. He wasn’t able to kill the speed of the thrust and was pushed backwards. Like what had happened to Alphina earlier, Prince Avenlock was slammed against the stone wall of the room.

“*Never* show your face in front of my Alph ever again. Do you understand me?!” Prince Lionett spat coldly.

Prince Avenlock didn’t even twitch in response. It seemed that he had been knocked out cold.

Wow! The Lord Blackrose was knocked down in a single blow?! The fact that Alphina was actually alive must have distracted him. But even more surprising than Avenlock’s defeat was Prince Lionett’s strength. The two of them had been on equal footing during their duel in the forest, but he’d just now managed to knock the Prince of Heavenrose away with a single blow. Had he suddenly become super powerful in less than a month?

“My joy over my beloved Alph being alive—as well as my love for her—has given me strength.”

Um... Er... Prince Lionett, I don’t think you should say that kind of stuff out loud. He had been so prickly during their school days—always “Humph”-ing

away—but it seemed that he'd completely gotten over himself.

“Alphina! Your face! All red! Do your ouchies hurt?” Carl asked.

“Lady Alphina! Please get ahold of yourself!” Scarlet exclaimed.

"Princess Alphina, stay strong! I'll patch you up right now!" Kithling yelled.

Carl, Scarlet, Kithling... Thank you for worrying about me, but my face being red has nothing to do with my injuries...

It seemed that the royal guards were completely consumed by fear upon seeing Prince Avenlock's defeat. Though they raised their weapons in an attempt to claim vengeance for their master, their knees were so wobbly that they couldn't even take a single step forward. They were no match for Prince Lionett, who tore through them as easily as blowing the flame out on a candle. The Golden Sword was practically a one-man army, and upon seeing his display of strength, the Xenites fled as one. Of course, the Saint was among them.

“Hey, get out of the way!” she snapped.

“GUOH!”

Mulberry Mood had been running in front of her until she shoved him aside to try and be the first one out of the room. But there was no way that the Prince wouldn't notice that. He swiftly approached the Saint from behind and grabbed her by the back of her collar, tossing her to the ground.

“And where do you think you’re going, Saint?” The voice coming out of the prince’s mouth was so cold that the temperature of the entire room dropped to freezing. His “Lord Cold Heart” nickname was no exaggeration. It was hard to believe that this was the same person who had been spouting all that nonsense about love earlier. “Saint...no, wench, you surely couldn’t have forgotten that His Imperial Majesty has issued an order for your execution, could you?”

“S-S-S-S-S-S-Squee!!!!!!! Y-Y-Y-Y-Your Highness, this is a m-m-m-m-mista—!” Little Miss Piggy trembled from head to toe. Unable to rise, she backed up as best she could while still on the ground, dragging her white robes along with her.

“There is no longer any need to walk you to the guillotine. I shall part your

head from your shoulders myself. Right here and right now.”

“Y-You mean to say you’ll execute me?! When I’m the servant of our great Xenos? Do you not fear divine retribution?!”

“The only thing I fear is a world without Alphina. I would suffer through a thousand lightning strikes from Xenos if it meant that I could save her.”

“Tsk!” The Saint’s face twisted into an ugly snarl. The prince raised his sword, and at that moment, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her robes and pulled out a bright silver crystal.

That’s...! “Your Highness, watch out!” called Alphina. “That stone is—!”

But it was too late; the Saint had cast Barrier. The spell activated, and a silver barricade fell around her like a curtain of light.

“You think that’ll stop me?!” the prince yelled, but when he swung his sword down, it was knocked away by the barricade of light. “What?!”

If this had been a normal magic shield, then a dragonslayer’s sword would’ve been able to pierce through it. So that must have meant this Barrier was surely...

“Heh heh heh, it’s useless, you hear me? Useless! My Magic Wall is special! You can’t do *anything* to me! Squee hee hee!!!!!!!!!!” Little Miss Piggy shrieked. Her eyes were bloodshot, and it was clear to anyone who saw her that she was no longer in her right mind.

Er, wait. Huh? Could it be that we can use magic right now?

It seemed that the prince destroying the wall when he’d broken into the room had dispelled the Antimagic. But even so, that still didn’t solve their main problem: the Saint’s Magic Wall was likely strong enough to repel all manner of offensive spells.

“Squee hee hee! Lionett! Kithling! Carl! I wanted to make you three allllll mine, but you *still* insist on saying that Alphina is better than me?! Better than the Saint?!”

The three of them didn’t hesitate to reply.

“Of course,” Lionett said.

“Obviously,” Kithling agreed.

“I love Alphina! I hate you!” Carl yelled.

The Saint’s expression twisted even further. “GRRRRR!!!!!! Oh, whatever! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill each and every single one of you!!!!!!!!!!!!” She reached her left hand into her robes once again and took out a magic gem that was as red as blood. It was fairly large, pulsing ominously as if it were a human heart.

That’s not good! It was the medium for Self-Destruct. Kithling and Carl, who were familiar with magic, jerked backwards, and even Lionett, less studious about it than they were, kept his distance from the Saint upon sensing how unnatural the stone was.

“It’s useless, you know! Useless, useless! My Self-Destruct is so powerful that it can blow up this entire shrine like KABOOM! Sure, I’ll die, but I’m taking you all with me! ALPHINA, I’LL SEND YOU RIGHT BACK INTO THE SKY WHERE YOU BELONG! KABOOM, KABOOM!!!!!!!!!! SERVES YOU RIGHT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Oh dear. First, my head goes flying off my shoulders, and next, my entire body will be sent flying into the sky? I’m less scared and more exasperated at this point. It’s not as if dying is scary or anything. That’s right. Death isn’t scary at all! I’ve already died ninety-nine times, remember?

Alphina knew that the line between life and death was paper-thin, and she had never been fixated on the idea of living. What she was truly afraid of was something else—to meet her end without having been able to do everything that she was capable of.

“Fireball!” She held out her hands in front of her and created a ball of magical flames before shooting it out towards the Saint. The fire dispersed in front of the Saint’s ugly mug as she continued to squeal with laughter. Not a single hair on her head had been burned. “Thunderstorm! Blizzard! Icicle Lance!” Alphina continued casting spell after spell towards the Saint’s piglike snout. But the end result remained the same. She wasn’t able to put a dent in the Saint’s barrier.

“Alphina, me too!” Carl volunteered, rushing forward.

“No, Carl!” she quickly yelled. “Your spells will end up damaging the room instead!”

“She’s right,” Kithling agreed, pushing up his glasses. “I believe that the Saint’s Wall renders magic ineffective, regardless of its power.”

The prince held up his sword and stepped in front of Alphina as if to protect her. “That’s enough, Alphina. Leave the rest to me and get as far away from here as you can.”

“It’s useless, Prince Lionett. Even if I run away now, I’m not going to be able to escape in time.”

In Alphina’s opinion, she had calmly pointed out the facts, but the prince was stubborn.

“Alph, I’m begging you to run. I don’t wish to see the woman I love die in front of me again.” Each word conveyed the prince’s love, and his inner voice was exactly the same. *(Ah... So I am to die here with my beloved Alph, am I? I apologize, my subjects. I hope you all forgive me for what a useless prince I’ve been.)*

(If I could make but a single wish,) Prince Lionett’s inner voice continued, (I wish that I could kiss Alphina, even just once.)

Forget the kiss for now. Forget why my face is red for now. Inner voice, huh?

Carl’s inner voice was thus: *(I don’t mind dying with Alphina. I’m prepared. I don’t want to be alone anymore. So now, I can be with Alphina. Forever.)*

Aah... I’m going to start drooling again. Drool’s going to come pouring out of my eyes again.

And then there was Kithling’s inner voice: *(I already know how frigid the world is without Princess Alphina. If the alternative to dying is returning to that icy cage of a world, then I have no need for my life. But if I could make one single wish, I wish that she could’ve given me a pat on the head right before the end! Just once!)*

Er... A pat on your head? Didn’t I do that for you when we were in school? Oh, but I certainly can’t do that for you anymore. We’re both adults now.

In any case...inner voices... When Alphina focused, she could hear them.

(Squee hee!!!!!!!!!! Squee hee!!!!!!!!!! Squee hee!!!!!!!!!!)

And it wasn't just that of the Saint, who had basically transformed into a pig, both on the inside and out. There was someone else whose voice reached both Alphina's mind and ears.

"Al...phina..." the man said, standing up slowly from the mountain of debris. "Alphina. Alphina. Alphina. Alphina." His voluminous black hair was covered with dust, as well as blood that had poured from the various wounds all over his body. He walked as if dragging his long legs. But even so, he was slowly, gradually approaching Alphina.

"Avenlock?! You're alive?!" Prince Lionett yelled. He rushed forward as if to try and cut Avenlock off, but Alphina placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Prince Lionett, I have a plan," she hissed.

"A plan?"

"I don't know if it'll work, but please... I ask that you trust me enough to put your life in my hands."

Like she'd said, Alphina had no idea if she could pull it off. The Saint's Magic Wall might deflect it entirely. But this plan of hers was the only card they had left to play. Swords couldn't damage the Saint. Offensive magic couldn't break through her barrier. So how about Alphina's final trick?

"Carl! Kithling! Prince Lionett! Prepare yourselves for this one!" With that warning, Alphina closed her eyes to focus on activating her magic.

She would use two spells: Communication and Amplification. Indeed, these were the same two that she'd used on the day of her hundredth execution. Communication was a spell for conveying to others the inner voices that Alphina could hear. Amplification would allow her to broadcast those voices across a large radius. She would combine those two spells just like she'd done to the Saint that day. However, this time, her target was someone else.

"Black Rosie-Wosie! Alphie-tee-hee! ♪"

Lyrics: Me! | Composer: Me again! | Arrangement: You know it—it's me!

♪ Black Rosie-Wosie! Black Rosie-Wosie!
 ♪ Rosie-wosie, rosie-wosie, shoo-be-doo-wop!
 ♪ Alphie-tee-hee! Alphie-tee-hee!
 ♪ Tee-hee, tee-hee, mai-ya-hee-hee!
 ♪ Rosie-tee-hee, rosie-tee-hee!
 ♪ We're drawn together like bees and knees!
 ♪ Y-Y-Y-You weren't dead!
 ♪ Hooray! Alphie's back from the dead!
 ♪ Alphie! (YEAH!!!!!!!!!!!!)
 ♪ Alphie! (OH!!!!!!!!!!!!)
 ♪ Wanna go on a hot date with you right now!
 ♪ But the Saint is soooooo in the way!
 ♪ Get outta here! Go away! And don't even bother looking back!
 ♪ Get run over by a carriage and die!
 [Chorus]: ♪ Rosie-wosie, rosie-wosie, tee-hee-hee!
 [Chorus]: ♪ Rosie-wosie, rosie-wosie, tee-hee-hee!
 [Spoken]: If we had a kid...their name would be Rosaphie...

“YEEEEEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOWWWWWCCCHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”
 The Saint's scream echoed off of the walls. There was no blaming her. It was completely understandable to want to squirm around in pain upon hearing Prince Avenlock's “beautiful” singing voice ring in your head at the highest possible volume without any prior preparation.

Well? Alphina thought as she watched the Saint thrash about. *It feels like someone's churning your brains around inside your skull, doesn't it? I hope you can understand the shock I felt on the day that the princes had their duel in my forest.*

“Wha—??????!!!!!!!!!! Just wha—??????!!!!!!!!!! What

is...this...?????!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Oh, that’s not gonna help you, Little Miss Piggy. It’s useless to try and cover your ears. I mean, this is his inner voice. It’s ringing right inside of your head. It’s impossible to focus, isn’t it? You’re probably not even able to use your magic right now, huh?

“NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!! MY BRAIN!!!!!! IT’S MELTING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The silver crystal and the red gem fell from the Saint’s hands, and Alphina raced forward to snatch them up.

“Now, Your Highness!” she yelled.

“Understood!” Prince Lionett’s sword slashed out, too fast for the human eye to follow.

From Alphina’s point of view, it just looked like his sword had merely flickered for a second. But then, with a sharp *PSSSHHHHTTTTT*, the Saint’s head bid an eternal farewell to her body. She had finally experienced for herself what she’d forced Alphina to go through countless times.

“Carl, don’t look,” Alphina said, gently cupping her hands over Carl’s eyes from behind. Her own eyes were fixated on the sight of the Saint’s body slowly collapsing to the ground.

Goodbye, Saint—no, Debonaire Lua Lightmist. I just hope that you can find a hottie who fits your taste in the underworld.

Everything had come to an end. The Saint’s head went flying off of her shoulders, and with that, all the conflict seemingly flew away with it.

Now then, it’s time to finish up my final task. Alphina turned to look at the gem and crystal the Saint had left behind. The red gem serving as the medium for Self-Destruct was still pulsing in a most ominous way.

“How come the spell hasn’t been deactivated?” Prince Lionett asked. “The Saint’s the one who cast it, and she’s already dead.”

“Because of the type of magic it is, Self-Destruct can still activate even if its user is deceased,” Kithling explained. Alphina hardly felt surprised as her eyes

remained fixated on the magical bomb. Seeing that, Kithling held a hand out to her and said, “Princess Alphina! Please hand me that gem. I’ll try to dispel it.”

“It’s no use, Kithling. You’re not going to make it in time.”

The intervals between each heartbeat were getting shorter and shorter. It no longer produced a steady *thump thump* and had become closer to an incessant *thum-thum-thum* as it continued its countdown to the explosion. The gem was becoming hotter and hotter too. At this point, it was too late to attempt to escape or toss it away.

“Carl, Scarlet, come stand by me,” Alphina ordered.

“Yes, Alphina.”

“I understand.”

The three of them crowded together. The prince and Kithling started to approach as well but froze when Alphina declared, “Please don’t come any closer.”

“Why?!” Lionett demanded.

“I’m going to use the Magic Wall that the Saint left behind to try and minimize the force of the Self-Destruct spell. I’ll have Scarlet and Carl lend me their magic and try to contain the explosion around myself.”

The two men’s expressions changed instantly.

“Then, Alph, let me remain by your side!” Lionett yelled. “If you’re going to die, allow me to die with you!”

“I agree!” Kithling added. “I’ve gone too far now to care about losing my life!”

“No, Prince Lionett. Your responsibility from now on is to lead the empire. And Kithling, you have to stay by his side and support him. Isn’t that right?”

The two of them fell silent, and from behind them, another man wobbled towards Alphina and the others. “No, Alphina, don’t leave me alone again... Please...”

“Prince Avenlock,” Alphina said, “you also have your duty to lead the king—”

“Why should I care what happens to the kingdom!” Avenlock bellowed. “My

only desire is to stay by your side, Alphina!”

Oh, come on... Alphina shrugged her shoulders and then regarded the princes’ tearstained faces. “Get ahold of yourselves! Are you two literal children?! The future emperor of Lione and the future king of Heavenrose, so infatuated with a single woman that they’ve lost sight of what’s really important! You’re the exact same as that boy-crazy Saint!”

Realization sparked in their eyes. The words “the exact same as that boy-crazy Saint” must have severely damaged their pride. When all was said and done, the little piggy had actually proved herself useful.

“I want the two of you to get along from now on,” Alphina continued. “And remember—absolutely no wars! Understand?”

The two men were silent for a moment before they opened their mouths.

“I understand.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Holding onto Scarlet with her right arm and Carl with her left, Alphina offered the other three a soft smile. “Goodbye, Prince Lionett. Goodbye, Kithling. Goodbye, Avenlock. It was fun. Thank you.”

The red gem ceased its palpitations, and a bright flash suddenly filled the room.

“Alph!”

“Alphina!”

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH, AAAAAALPHIEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The screams and cries of the three men sounded out like a requiem. And thus, Alphina Shinn Sylvana lost her life for the hundredth time.

Epilogue

The newspapers in both the empire and the kingdom were terribly eventful in the following days. Headlines included: “Explosive Terrorist Incident at Heavenrose Castle Shrine,” “Saint Debonaire Behind Terrorist Incident,” “Saint Debonaire Accidentally Died from Own Explosion Spell,” “Possible Motive For Saint’s Terrorism Linked to Dissatisfaction with Crown,” and “Army Starts Investigation into Church of Xenos; What Truth Lies behind the Gilded Curtains?”

The official story was that the Self-Destruct was the final explosion in the Saint and the church’s long string of terrorist acts. The empire’s smartest advisor must have come up with that explanation. The Saint had pinned her crimes on Alphina for a hundred lifetimes, but this time, she had to bear the responsibility for something Alphina had done. This was what they called “karma.” For the longest time, Alphina had thought that Xenos didn’t exist, but if this was his divine punishment for the Saint, then he had a pretty wicked sense of humor.

After several days of news regarding the terrorism, a small article appeared in the newspaper. “A buyer has been found for the exploration ship *EV Boyd*, which has been up for sale in Port Glass. It seems that a noblewoman from the Far East made the purchase. Mariners are perplexed at the odd pairing of a noblewoman and an exploration ship,” it read.

Yet as more and more of the Saint’s villainy was brought to light, people focused their attention on that. The tiny, insignificant story about the noblewoman and the ship floated from the public’s mind like bubbles into the sky.

Two hours still remained until they were to set sail. Arle and her companions sat in a café on the wharf to enjoy their final moments in the Heavenrose Kingdom. Though she would have left to lounge about and leisurely enjoy her

tea, her brother sitting next to her would not leave her alone. He would try to sit on her lap or else stretch his neck out in a wordless plea for Arle to stroke his hair.

“Hey now, Carl! Just how much more attention do you want from me?” Even while she was scolding him, he gave her a tight hug. With a, “There, there,” she wiped away the cookie crumbs from around his mouth with her handkerchief. Across from them, her loyal butler, Scarlet, was reading a newspaper while nodding to himself. “You’re reading that awfully intently, Scarlet. Did they write about something interesting today?”

“Yes, Lady Arle. It seems that a treaty of amity will be signed between the kingdom and the empire.”

“R-Really?”

Ever since their foundations, the Lione Empire and the Kingdom of Heavenrose had always been intertwined in minor conflicts. If they really *were* to sign a treaty of amity, then that would constitute a major historical event.

“Apparently, Prince Lionett and Prince Avenlock unanimously agreed to one during their meeting the other day. It says here that the talks were very peaceful.”

Alphina hummed. “Even though they used to be on such bad terms that they would greet each other with swords before a hello?”

“According to a reporter’s interview, the two of them said that it was all to keep their promise to a certain woman. They said so in unison too! I wonder who they could be talking about? She must be quite the impressive lady.”

There was a smug smile on Scarlet’s face, so Arle poked his forehead. “Who knows who she is? Considering she has the affections of both the Golden Sword and Lord Blackrose, she must be an unprecedented beauty.”

“Oh yes, you’re absolutely correct!” Scarlet exclaimed. “She’s the most beautiful woman in the world!”

“I agree with Scarlet!” Carl piped up.

Arle didn’t even know what to say in response to that. *Er, that was supposed*

to be a joke. Well, it's all right. I don't mind being the most beautiful woman in the world for these two.

"It would be terrible if they were to find out that you're actually alive, Lady Arle. I'm sure they'd come running after you."

"Oh, stop that, you." Arle shrugged. "I went through all that effort to make it look like the three of us died in that explosion. I'd pitch a fit if they were able to figure out the truth without even breaking a sweat!"

"Don't worry; I'm sure it's fine," Scarlet reassured her. "Lady Arle, I'm certain you were the only person there who would have thought of using the Saint's Magic Wall to contain the Self-Destruct."

"I was only able to come up with it because I'd been preparing for that exact scenario."

"Right. I have to say, I was fairly surprised when you told me your plan..."

From the beginning, that had been the final step of Arle's plan. Originally, she would have done it after handing the Saint over to the empire's forces. And for that reason, she had kept Teleportation gems inside of her pocket and told Scarlet: *"After everything ends, let's all Teleport away—you, me, and Carl—and hide ourselves somewhere."*

"But are you really fine with leaving everything behind?" Scarlet asked. "You have two world-famous heroes who love you with all their hearts."

"And that's exactly why!" Both Lionett and Avenlock were the type of men who wore their heroic prestige like a second skin. If they found out that she was still alive, wouldn't they just continue their conflict over her? What if the two countries could never find peace so long as "Alphina" was still alive? Then the best thing she could do for everyone would be to disappear, wouldn't it?

Just kidding! I actually just wanna live as I please without having to be tied down by love or marriage!

"By the way, Scarlet, have you sent out that letter?"

"Yes, I made sure to send it this morning."

The letter was addressed to her parents back in the empire. It told them that

she and Carl were safe, as well as what had happened over the past few months and what she planned on doing in the future. She'd ended it by saying that they would see each other once they'd finished a few adventures, so please don't tell anyone that they were alive! The words had been penned in Alphina's own hand.

"I'm not quite sure when we'll wrap up our adventures, though," Arle said with a sigh. Her peaceful existence in the forest had been good, but the idea of living a stormy life at sea didn't sound too bad either. She would live as free and uninhibited a life as she wanted to, no matter where she ended up. That was the future that Arle had chosen for herself.

After the group left the café, they walked along the wharf. The briny wind hitting their faces was refreshing. In the distance, they could make out the sails of the boat that would take them to shores and waters they'd never seen before. On it, their hired crew was undoubtedly preparing to set sail, but there was still some unfinished business before they could leave the harbor.

"All right, Carl," Arle said, turning to her brother. "Can I ask you to do what I requested earlier?"

Carl gently tilted his head to the side and stared at his sister straightforwardly. "Is it really all right, Arle?"

"Of course."

"Are you truly certain about this, Lady Arle?" Scarlet asked. "If you undergo the Sealing, then you'll never be able to hear people's inner voices again."

"It's fine." This was something that she had decided when she'd settled on traveling the world. It would be better if she could no longer hear everyone's thoughts. People were far more interesting when you didn't know what they were thinking. "I'll leave it to you, Carl. You're the only person whose magic is powerful enough to contain mine."

With the aqua gem Arle had prepared as a medium in hand, Carl began his incantation. Now, Arle could live her life as a normal noblewoman. She would never again have to listen to people's inner voices, or yells, or songs.

Or at least, that was how it was meant to go.

♪ Rosie-wosie, tee-hee!

♪ Rosie-wosie, tee-hee!

♪ My beloved Alphie! Alphie! Alphie!

♪ Alphie! Phieeeeeee! Tee-hee-phieeeee!

“PFFFFT!” Arle couldn’t contain a splutter at the sudden song ringing out within her mind. She ended up distracting Carl, halting the Sealing process halfway through. When she turned in the direction she heard the song from, she saw a man with black hair and dark skin. There was a dangerous smile on his face as he confidently walked towards them.

“Hello, Alphina. Long time no see.” It was Avenlock Heavenrose, but he wasn’t dressed in the fancy outfit of a prince. No armor adorned his body, though he still had his sword in his belt. Slung over his shoulder was a sack that a wandering traveler might use.

“P-Prince Avenlock?! Wh-Why are you here?!” Arle demanded.

“I figured that it’d be dangerous for a woman and some children to travel alone. I might be overstepping, but I guarantee you’ll find no better bodyguard than Lord Blackrose,” he said with a wink. He didn’t seem like the same person that he’d been in the forest or the shrine. In fact, he carried himself the same way he’d done when he was just the Debauched Prince at school.

“Er, bodyguard? Why? Actually, wait—how did you know about us?” she said.

“Don’t underestimate me. I figured that you wouldn’t die from something as minor as an explosion, and that you must have planned to escape somewhere. So I kept an eye out on the merchants—specifically those handling ships—within the kingdom.”

“Grr... I let my guard down...”

“Ha ha, don’t forget. The Kingdom of Heavenrose is *my* country.”

This... All right, I concede. You win this round, Avenlock. And here I thought I’d

completely played you for a fool! What a cheater! Just because you're a prince!

"Is it all right for you to leave your country and go on a trip, then?" Scarlet asked. "I'm sure the palace is in a panic right about now thanks to your disappearance."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Avenlock said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "That's why I signed that treaty of amity with the empire. There should be peace for a while, and besides, it might be better in the long run if I'm not there to potentially spark conflict. Right, Carl?"

Hey, you, stop that! Don't talk to my brother like you're pals! And Carl! Stop nodding at him!

"U-Um, Prince Avenlock?" Arle ventured.

"Hmm? What is it, my sweet honey?" Avenlock replied.

H-Honey?!

"Er, did you, by any chance, tell Prince Lionett about my survival?"

"Oh. Of course I did!"

"WHAT?!" she screeched.

"I'm not satisfied with anything other than a fair bout," he said proudly. "Ah, but there's no need to worry about that, is there? That spoiled little prince would never have the guts to abandon his position and go traveling aro—"

But before Avenlock could finish his sentence, a pair of voices rang out in the air:

"Alph!"

"Lady Alphina!"

She didn't even have to turn around to see who they belonged to. She knew them all too well.

"Huh... It seems that he's gone through a change as well," Lord Blackrose said with a smarmy smile.

It seemed that a newfound friendship had blossomed between the men thanks to mutual understanding and respect. Not that Arle cared, though! "Carl!

Scarlet!” She grabbed their hands tightly. “Let’s make our escape! Run as fast as you can!”

“Yes, Arle!”

“Understood, Lady Arle!”

The three of them raced off at full speed towards the white sails fluttering in the sea breeze.

“Wait for me, Alph! I’m coming with you! I’d go to the ends of the earth with you if that’s your desire!”

“Please allow me to accompany you, Princess Alphina! This time for sure, I’ll go to the ends of the earth with you!”

“Things are never dull when you’re involved. Alphina, I’ll have you tag along with me on my adventures for a whi—nay, for a lifetime!”

Ah, sheesh! This shouldn’t have anything to do with me!

November 15, 845 Anno Xenos...

Historians would later note this day as the beginning of a noblewoman’s journey with her companions—a grand adventure that ended up involving the whole world.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Yuji Yuji. This work, which I call *99 Loops* (*100th Time* in English), was born from editing and adding on to a story that I had previously published on Shosetsuka ni Naro and AlphaPolis. Aside from the familiar elements of “just deserts,” “calling off one’s engagement,” “going through loops,” and “obsessive love,” if I had to name a twist that makes this work unique, it’s that all of the male characters who show up are very hot and cold.

All of them are actually super in love with the main character, Alphina, but they’ve been cursed by the root of all evil (the Saint) and can’t reveal their true emotions. Of course, Alphina believes that she’s totally disliked, but after looping through her life ninety-nine times, she unlocks a cheat that allows her to hear people’s true feelings. After that, she comes to realize just how much the men in her life care for her. That’s the kind of story this is. I hope that you were able to enjoy the men’s hot-and-cold attitudes, as well as how crazy in love they were, alongside a flustered Alphina.

Now, I’d like to express my gratitude. First, I’d like to thank Nami Hidaka, my illustrator. When I decided that I would write a story about a noble daughter, I’d hoped that I could get Hidaka to draw pictures for it. I didn’t think that my wish would come true. In fact, I still can’t believe it. Thank you so much for designing such cute and cool characters.

Next, I’d like to thank my editor, Kohara. Thank you for giving me such exact advice when I struggled in my first attempts to write a story of this genre. I hope we’ll work well together going forward.

Finally, I’d like to thank all of the people who enjoyed this work when it was still just a story on the web. It’s with the support of readers like yourself that this book was able to see the light of day.

99 Loops is part of DRE Novels, which is a new light novel label. I will continue to create works to be a part of your bookshelf, so I hope you will continue to

support *99 Loops* and DRE Novels.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Interlude: Lionett \(1\)](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Interlude: Carl](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Interlude: Kithling](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Interlude: Lionett \(2\)](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The 100th Time's the Charm: She Was Executed 99 Times, So How Did She Unlock "Super Love" Mode?! Volume 1

by Yuji Yuji

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Casey Pritt

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Yuji Yuji, Nami Hidaka 2022

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Drecom Co., Ltd.

This English edition is published in arrangement with Drecom Co., Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: May 2023

Premium E-Book for